

REASSESSING THE SOCIAL

SOCIAL DESIGN NETWORK CONFERENCE 2025, LUCERNE

UNDERSTANDING TRANSFORMATION



18.-20. SEPTEMBER '25 PROCEEDINGS

SOCIAL DESIGN NETWORK CONFERENCE 2025

REASSESSING THE SOCIAL-UNDERSTANDING TRANSFORMATION

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIAL DESIGN NETWORK CONFERENCE 2025

**Reassessing the Social – Understanding Transformation.
Proceedings of the Social Design Network Conference 2025**

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FROM 18–20 SEPTEMBER 2025, THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL DESIGN NETWORK COMMUNITY GATHERED IN BERN AND LUCERNE TO REFLECT ON HOW OUR FIELD IS BEING RE-SHAPED BY INTERTWINED CRISES AND TRANSFORMATIONS. THE PHD SYMPOSIUM AT HKB IN BERN OPENED THE CONVENING WITH A FOCUS ON ENGAGED RESEARCH AND ITS TENSIONS; THE TWO CONFERENCE DAYS AT HSLU IN LUCERNE EXPANDED THE CONVERSATION ACROSS TALKS, WORKSHOPS, EXHIBITS, AND CONVIVIAL FORMATS. TOGETHER THESE PROCEEDINGS DOCUMENT THAT ENCOUNTER AND THE MANY PATHWAYS IT HAS OPENED.

● Andreas Unteidig, Bianca Herlo, Paola Pierri

reassessing the social understanding transformation

After the gathering: why these pages matter

Proceedings published weeks after an event are not a mere record; they are a relay. The texts collected here—paper manuscripts and abstracts of talks, alongside documentation of workshops and interventions—do more than summarize. They reposition ideas in the cooler light of retrospect, connect threads across sessions and disciplines, and invite further work in studios, classrooms, and neighborhoods. Our theme, “Reassessing the Social: Understanding Transformation,” asked us to take stock of our assumptions about “the social” precisely because it is not a stable category. What counts as social is made and remade—through politics and the political, conflict and care, infrastructures and imaginations—and through design itself. The conference framing emphasized the shifting terrain we face: diversification and polarization, climate adaptation, redistributions of capital and privilege, and the deepening datafication of everyday life. That framing lives on as a lens for reading this volume.

A glimpse into future social design practices

PhD researchers play a crucial role in shaping a discipline’s future—by asking new questions, reassessing certainties, and experimenting with methods. They bring fresh perspectives and challenge what is taken for granted. In the PhD Symposium we created space for critical voices from different geographies. More than twenty doctoral students explored the challenges, ethics, and values of doing engaged research in social design: research that aims to critically interrogate and change the world politically. The Symposium offered a glimpse of a coming future—locally committed and globally connected, responsible, and holding reciprocity as a key value.

What emerged across tracks

The main conference was organized around three tracks, which served as vantage points that often overlapped in practice.

Diversity & New Actors explored participation beyond tokenism, asking how alliances are built (and with whom), how accountability and agency operate under data regimes, and how power might be reclaimed or redistributed—including through more-than-human entanglements.

New Conflicts, Old Identities stayed with polarization rather than smoothing it over. Several pieces work in the key of productive agonism: refusing false reconciliation while designing infrastructures for “staying with the trouble.” (as Haraway said). Others interrogate shifting lines of capital—economic, cultural, social, and data-rich—and their design implications.

Pedagogies for (Eco-)Social Transformation asked what capacities and literacies design education must nurture now—critical, ethical, collaborative, relational, ecological. Many authors write from their classrooms and labs, offering situated experiments as well as tools that travel. The track’s cross-cultural ambition, supported by the Swiss Leading House South Asia, is visible in the range of cases gathered.

Across all tracks, we noticed a shared insistence on relations, and a joint

focus on perspectives of maintenance and hospitality as much as on invention; design's "outputs" were often infrastructures for learning together, negotiating conflict, opening up possibilities, or holding open spaces where multiple truths can co-exist.

Orientations: keynotes and closing panel

Keynotes and the closing panel offered orientation. Flor Avelino's opening mapped power and prefiguration in just sustainability transitions, offering language for what many projects attempt on the ground. Jesko Fezer's address on "partisan design" pushed us to own our orientations and accountabilities. The closing conversation with Shilpa Das, Chris Kasabach, and Vera Sacchetti tied those threads back to education, institutions, and public practice. To conclude, we gathered in a circle to discuss open questions for social design—its economy, its plural and engaged nature, and the idea that a practice so deeply contextual knows no centres or peripheries.

Convivial formats as method

The conference wove critique into conviviality. Collective making, exhibits, and the shared dinner workshop functioned as epistemic spaces—sites where knowledge moved sideways through materials, stories, and embodied tasks. Interventions such as The Pollination Hub foregrounded the community's own needs: how we reflect, connect, decompress, and extend the field; how we make room for emerging voices and more-than-human perspectives. Several contributions in this volume document these gestures not as accessories to the "real" work, but as central to it.

Access, support, and the infrastructures that made SDNC25 possible

Conversations about access were matched by concrete measures. A solidarity pricing model supported different participant situations, and, with the Watson Foundation's Design Leadership Initiative and the Swiss National Science Foundation, we offered 24 scholarships to broaden participation. These supports, alongside the Winterhouse Institute and the support of HSLU leadership, materially shaped who could be in the room and thus what could be said. We are grateful to our host institutions—HSLU and HKB—and to the network of supporters and partners acknowledged throughout these pages.

A note on voice, care, and acknowledgment

Our goal was to create a conference designed with sensibility: welcoming diverse epistemologies; naming maintenance, hospitality, and administrative labor as part of knowledge production; and making space for disagreement without collapse. Many of the papers extend that stance. The editors wish to acknowledge the labor—visible and invisible—that made both the gathering and these proceedings possible: authors, reviewers, student volunteers, administrators, technicians, designers, and all those whose contributions went unrecorded.

From field notes to field building

Read collectively, the contributions sketch a field that is plural, pragmatic, and engaged. Plural, because many authors refuse singular narratives—about "the user," progress, neutrality, or scale. Pragmatic, because projects are measured not only by artifacts but by the infrastructures they help prototype: coalitions, curricula, governance arrangements, care protocols, repertoires for agonistic dialogue. Engaged, because accountability—to place, partners, and publics—shows up in methodological choices, not only aspirations.

Several essays take up design's relationship to power explicitly: who is empowered or disempowered by our methods; how data, capital, and institutional logics shape outcomes; where we must refuse to design and instead help unbuild or redistribute. Others offer literacies and tools for eco-social transformation—ways to teach, learn, and evaluate that are honest about limits yet ambitious about possibilities.

If "social design" names anything coherent, it is a commitment: to enabling fairer, more livable arrangements with humility in complex systems; to incremental change where leverage is local; to coalitions where design is one actor among many; to listening where we lack standing. Perhaps a near future is one in which the adjective "social" becomes superfluous because equity, care, and responsibility are inseparable from all design. Until then, we keep practicing, together.

These pages carry that practice forward.

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NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORKS AS INFRASTRUCTURING TALES OF DIFFUSE INFRASTRUCTURING FROM RETE CORVETTO

Keywords: infrastructuring, neighborhood networks, participatory design, local welfare, collaborative practices

Abstract

Welfare systems are becoming more participatory. As a result, networks have emerged as fundamental coordination tools. Existing research overlooks neighborhood networks or studies them through frameworks that miss how they actually function. This paper explores neighborhood networks through an infrastructuring lens, showing their role as platforms for collaboration in local welfare contexts. The research is based on a 26-month qualitative study in Rete Corvetto (Corvetto Network) in Milan. The paper introduces the concept of diffuse infrastructuring participation. It describes the distributed socio-material processes through which network participants are enabled to create connections and collaborations without centralized coordination. These insights offer recommendations for Social and Participatory Design professionals engaged with neighborhood networks and enhance our understanding of collective action in local welfare systems.

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Section 1

Economic crises have changed Italy's welfare system (Simonazzi, 2015) toward more participatory models where public, private, and third sectors collaborate at the local scale (Cataldi & Cappellato, 2020). This paper looks at these types of networks in urban neighborhoods, characterized by diverse membership, a long-term commitment, and a focus on local problems.

Unlike project partnerships, neighborhood networks (NNs) have a long-term scope. They enable different forms of participation to emerge around neighborhood challenges.

Yet, a systematic understanding of how these networks function and evolve remains limited. Research has focused on their structures and governance, or on the relationships between actors. It has overlooked the daily practices that keep collaboration going and help new forms of participation develop. This gap represents an opportunity for design research to contribute insights into how these networks might be understood and supported.

Drawing from the infrastructural turn in social science and design research (Alam & Houston, 2020; Borghi & Leonardi, 2024), this paper examines NNs through an infrastructuring lens.

Based on a 26-month study of Rete Corvetto (RC, Corvetto Network), I propose the concept of diffuse Infrastructuring Participation (IP): the socio-material process by which network participants create connections, align resources, and form collaborations. Building on Manzini's (2015) distinction between diffuse and expert design, diffuse IP differs from the designer-led infrastructuring processes described in previous literature. While approaches such as those of Malmö Living Labs (MLLs; Björgvinsson et al., 2010, 2012a, 2012b) rely on the designer as facilitator and matchmaker, NNs operate through the distributed agency of diverse actors.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section establishes the theoretical framework, examining both NNs and infrastructuring in Participatory Design (PD) tradition. Following this, I present the methods used for the case study. I then introduce RC and its infrastructural components, followed by findings on diffuse IP practices. The paper concludes with a discussion of challenges, design opportunities, and implications for future work. The subtitle draws inspiration from Teli and colleagues (2020). While I present empirical findings from a single case study, this paper similarly aims to contribute theoretical insights through examples of how diffuse IP manifests in NNs.

Section 2

Section 2.1

NNs are long-term coordination networks composed of local actors. They tackle social issues by leveraging socio-territorial capital. Different fields of study look at these networks, each offering useful but limited perspectives. Sociology explores how relationships are formed, and social capital develops (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007). Yet, research has uncovered a paradox: while actors are aware of each other, they rarely cooperate (Salvini et al., 2020). Urban studies focus on place-based development and related political implications. Cellamare (2022), for example, introduces the

concept of “mutualistic networks.” They emerge from grassroots responses to institutional failures, leading to alternative governance structures (Pacchi, 2020).

Public administration studies examine coordination methods for policy implementation (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012) and how stakeholders collaborate to provide public services (Bianchi et al., 2021). These studies focus on networks that operate under clear mandates and institutional support.

Social innovation research examines emergent collaborative arrangements and interactive spaces (van Wijk et al., 2019), studying civic ecosystems as self-organizing systems with shared values (Rangelov & Theros, 2023). Here, community spaces are seen as “nodes” that generate collaborative relationships (Polyák et al., 2021).

While each field provides insights into a relevant aspect of NNs, they fall short in explaining how lasting collaboration occurs, often focusing on crisis situations (Benedetti et al., 2020; Greenberg et al., 2020).

Recent sociology studies have proposed conceptualizing educational communities (*comunità educanti*) (Galligani, 2024) and mutual aid groups (Lupoli, 2024) as examples of social infrastructuring. However, they lack nuanced descriptions of how these processes work in general-purpose coordination networks.

This paper suggests that infrastructuring literature in PD tradition, rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), provides a productive framework for understanding these networks. It sheds light on the daily socio-material practices that enable collaborative work over time and how design might facilitate them.

Section 2.2

The concept of infrastructuring builds on Star's view of infrastructures as relational (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). As exemplified by van der Bijl-Brouwer (2017), this means that, for a teacher, the classroom is an infrastructure for teaching, even if, for cleaners, it is the object of their work. Star identified nine key characteristics, including embeddedness, transparency, naturalization through membership, and visibility during breakdowns (Star & Bowker, 2006).

Building on these STS foundations, Karasti and Syrjänen (2004) introduced the term infrastructuring to emphasize that infrastructure development is an ongoing process of community-technology integration rather than a one-time design activity. This processual understanding opened new possibilities for PD intervention and support. Contemporary PD research interprets infrastructuring in diverse ways. I synthesize these approaches into two main orientations relevant to NNs.

Participatory Infrastructuring (PI) focuses on the collaborative development of technical tools, platforms, and organizational arrangements, including governance structures and coordination mechanisms, to support the everyday work of stable communities (Baibarac et al., 2021; Peer, 2023; Seravalli & Eriksen, 2017; Vaccaro & Cho, 2022).

Infrastructuring Participation (IP) focuses on supporting emergent design Things, designing for design-after-design (Ehn, 2008). Drawing from Actor-Network Theory, these design Things represent networks of human and non-human actors that assemble around matters of concern (Latour, 2004;

2005). IP manifests through interventions around specific concerns (Huybrechts et al., 2018; Spencer & Bailey, 2020) or around platforms, such as MLLs, supporting the emergence of multiple design Things over time.

Section 2.3

While PI literature offers valuable approaches for supporting NNs through design interventions, this paper focuses on the platform-based interpretation of IP, examining how RC already enables multiple emergent collaborations. Unlike existing IP studies that describe designer-led platforms where professionals facilitate connections and matchmaking, this research investigates how IP capacity emerges organically within NNs through distributed participant actions. Understanding this existing capacity is essential for developing future design approaches that can enhance rather than replace these distributed processes. The empirical investigation that follows examines how RC manifests these characteristics.

Section 3

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate RC's infrastructuring practices. I engaged in participant observation from March 2023 to the present. From March to November 2023, my role was purely observational. Later, I became actively involved by joining several network efforts, including a coordination group and a gentrification working group, as described in the findings.

Active participation is common in infrastructuring practices (see Berns et al., 2023). This dual researcher-participant role provided access to tacit knowledge while requiring reflexivity about my influence. I maintained a research diary to document not only observations but also my reactions and potential impacts on collaborative processes. I regularly verified my interpretations with coordination group members and occasionally engaged in methodological reflection with some of them about how my participation was influencing network dynamics. This happened particularly with the former coordinator, who became available for extensive critical discussions about network dynamics after leaving her formal role. From time to time, I deliberately stepped back from active participation to gain analytical distance from practices that had become routine and to reflect critically on network dynamics without being absorbed by daily tasks.

For comparative context, I am collecting data from other NNs as a non-participant observer. While the findings presented here are specific to RC, this broader data collection informs my interpretation.

Other data collection methods included a focus group with 15 participants, 14 semi-structured interviews (36-85 minutes), using maximum variation sampling to ensure representation across organizational types, roles, and involvement levels, and a structured questionnaire on participation patterns, used to triangulate qualitative findings.

For data analysis, I used thematic analysis, combining 24 deductive codes based on Star's infrastructural characteristics and infrastructuring in PD literature with inductive coding (Priya, 2021).

Section 4

Section 4.1

The activities of RC, composed of 58 organizations, focus on the Corvetto neighborhood in southeastern Milan. This area faces socioeconomic challenges but has strong community resources, including many third-sector organizations and active citizens' groups. RC started in 2015, when Laboratorio di Quartiere Mazzini (LdQM), a neighborhood lab set up by the Municipality of Milan, faced closure due to funding problems. A group of people who had worked with LdQM joined forces to keep the lab running as a local coordination hub. This created the informal network known as RC, which meets regularly once a month. RC underwent different management phases. From 2016 to 2018, it was self-governed by two volunteers. It was then co-managed by municipal operators and volunteers until 2019. After that, two consecutive operators ran the network, the last one stayed until December 2024. Currently, a coordination group of seven members manages the network. I should note that I participated in helping to form this group, although it was a joint effort by network participants. I remain an active member.

Section 4.2

The practices of RC rest on three interconnected components (Jo et al., 2024) that constitute its socio-material foundation. The spatial component of RC, drawing on what Enneking et al. (2025) conceptualize as social infrastructure, centers on the LdQM, which serves as the meeting arena (Haug, 2013) for monthly assemblies. This spatial dimension ties the network to a familiar place, giving it symbolic meaning. It encompasses not only the physical meeting space but also the temporal rhythms of monthly gatherings and the informal conversations that precede and follow formal sessions. The informational component includes meeting minutes, a Google Group, and other informal communication channels. These elements help create a shared understanding among participants who may not interact regularly in person and translate knowledge between different temporal and spatial scales of network activity. The human component includes the network's members and the human infrastructure (Peer, 2023): coordinator that organizes meetings, facilitates communication, and maintains network continuity. This coordination emerges through relational practices that involve people working together with technologies, spaces, and institutional knowledge. While analytically distinct, these components are interdependent. Without coordinators, having access to the meeting space could not sustain network activities. When email access codes remained with previous coordinators, informational tools became temporarily inaccessible. The absence of reliable Wi-Fi at the meeting space creates ongoing difficulties when people ask for remote participation, which coordinators need to address. These examples reveal how each component enables and is enabled by the others. In the context of this paper, however, the significance of these infrastructural components lies in how they enable diffuse IP—the capacity for network participants to create connections and collaborations without centralized coordination.

Section 4.3

Cooperation without Consensus

Monthly meetings enable selective engagement through structured presentations followed by informal connections. When organizations present their activities and seek collaborators, participants who recognize potential synergies interrupt briefly to note them aloud: “That sounds like something [organization Y] might be interested in” or “We should talk afterward about this,” and then return to listening. After the formal session ends, these flagged connections develop through conversations as people put on coats and gather their belongings. This process allows organizations to identify opportunities without feeling pressure to participate: Many of the things that happen there don't interest us [...] let me give you a practical example... our relationship with [organization] [...] there isn't a communion of intent, though we have collaborated logistically in some situations. (I4)

For instance, when one organization needed a platform, it asked another for free design help. That organization suggested asking a third for waste materials. When they needed transport, another organization offered its van during a meeting. Participants describe the network not as a unified entity with shared objectives, but as a space where autonomous organizations can engage on their own terms: The network works precisely because it leaves everyone free and doesn't impose anything. [...] the moment it becomes a “we must work together” situation, it doesn't work. (I3)

Boundary Crossing

The network facilitates cross-pollination between actors working on different objectives and thematic areas, overcoming the silos that often limit third-sector effectiveness (Gaeta, 2021). The network works as a transformative platform where: [Projects and actors] are listened to, welcomed, transformed, and put in relation to others. It is not a service provision but a process. (I8)

The collaboration between an organization working with individuals with mental health challenges and various network members shows this practice. When a photographer came to a meeting to present her project and ask if any organizations were interested in collaborating, the response was immediate and unanimous: “The guys from [organization]!” Network members already knew about their previous photography contests and theatrical work. This spontaneous collective recommendation contrasted sharply with previous networking experiences: Networking hasn't been easy before joining this network, because I encountered organizations that were very protective of their own territory, defending their approach, their reality [...] Here there's a ferment of ideas, of sharing, which is very democratic and very stimulating. (I7)

From time to time, network coordinators use their tacit knowledge of participants' resources to suggest collaborations that might not happen otherwise: During those years [initiative from the municipality] was also being born.

Also in that case, we had said that certain local organizations needed to be involved, in our opinion. Maybe at first, they weren't understood as... "But what do they have to do with this?" Yet then they turned out to be a perfect fit. (I11)

The network enables connections between organizations from different sectors through participant-led initiatives. They identify potential complementarities and initiate collaborations based on perceived mutual benefit.

Matters of Concern

Participant observation revealed how the network supports not only stable relationships but also the formation of temporary collectives in response to specific issues.

The network's approach to gentrification illustrates this practice in action. During monthly meetings, discussions around the issue and the possible role of the nonprofit sector in this process came up. Members interested in deepening the discussion gathered and started to meet regularly:

When someone brings forward an issue, as happened with gentrification, people mobilize and do the best they can. Sometimes certain initiatives fade away; others continue. (I4)

This collective, rather than sharing a clear position on the issue, sometimes ended up clashing due to very different points of view. Rather than forcing consensus, we developed an approach that accommodated multiple viewpoints while still producing concrete action: a public meeting that created dialogue about neighborhood changes.

Section 4.4

While diffuse IP enables flexible collaboration, it generates specific tensions. The distributed agency that enables autonomous action creates knowledge fragmentation, which in turn leads to systematic underutilization of member expertise and overlapping initiatives without coordination:

The network should allow everyone to benefit from the competencies of others. And I haven't seen this. We need meetings to discuss roles, responsibilities, and map problems and opportunities. (I14)

The preference for distributed agency and autonomy can limit the capacity for decisive collective action when institutional interfaces require clear coordination. When it came to imagining things to do together... then people back out, because "I don't have time... I have other things to do." It's complicated. In the end, it still weighs on the shoulders of the few who already do a lot. (I12)

Finally, the distributed and interconnected nature of diffuse IP makes it difficult to measure the network's impact using standard evaluation methods. It is spread across many small collaborations and relationships, so institutions and members themselves struggle to see its value:

With the whole story of [news case], I felt that the network was invisible. But I know the difficulty of evaluating the social impact of projects [...] All the things that happen here are difficult to evaluate. And so, because of its invisibility, it risks seeming useless to us sometimes. (I4)

Section 5

Section 5.1

These observations point to five key features that make diffuse IP different from more centralized approaches common in platform-based IP. These features work at different levels and combine to enable the observed patterns (Figure 1).

First, there is a balance between autonomy and interdependence. Participants keep their own identities and goals while knowing they need each other for complex challenges. By maintaining this balance, the network fosters "cooperation without consensus" (Bowker & Star, 1999).

Second, the agency for fostering collaboration and matchmaking is shared among participants rather than relying on coordinators. Third, the network supports both long-term relationships and short-term, goal-oriented partnerships. This flexibility in duration lets the network work as a stable base for ongoing projects and a resource for temporary initiatives.

Fourth, the network has open boundaries. The lack of rigid joining rules allow flexible participation. Moreover, over the years, the network has grown to include members who work outside Corvetto's strict limits:

At the beginning, we had a very strict focus on the neighborhood. But it didn't make much sense if that was meant to be a place where you facilitated the circulation of energy and resources. So, the idea was to cross-pollinate, and gradually, people from [another] neighborhood started coming, bringing more innovative ideas. (I11)

Fifth, connections are built through multiple channels, combining formal interactions like meeting presentations with informal exchanges.

Section 5.2

Making visible what sustains human relations and social capital (Stokes & De Coss-Corzo, 2023), we see how RC works as a socio-material platform. This platform includes meetings at LdQM, shared communication channels, and coordination practices.

The platform supports diffuse IP, allowing network participants to share resources and collaborate without centralized matchmaking. This process is similar to the platform-based view in IP, used to describe MLLs (Björqvinnsson et al., 2010, 2012a, 2012b). However, there is a key difference.

Rather than designer-led matchmaking, RC demonstrates how IP capacity can be distributed among all network participants. As Figure 1 summarizes, coordinators maintain the platform, but collaborative agency remains distributed among participants, who develop their own partnerships.

Drawing from Manzini's (2015) recognition that all people have natural design capabilities, infrastructuring capacity in NNs operates in the same way: through people's inherent collaborative abilities rather than designer expertise.

This has important implications for how we understand power and agency in infrastructuring processes. As Seravalli and Eriksen (2017) note, the designer's agenda plays a crucial role in determining what kind of collaboration emerges in expert-driven infrastructuring. Geppert and Forlano (2022) highlight how such approaches may inadvertently reinforce existing power hierarchies. In contrast, diffuse IP enables more horizontal relationships and distributed agency, rather than concentrating it in designers' decisions.

The story of RC then reveals its infrastructural characteristics. The resilience of the network despite the numerous changes in coordinators reveals its embeddedness in the work practices of the actors. The network, with its conventions of practice, social arrangements, and the mix of artifacts used for digital communication, invisibly supports its participants in carrying out activities. Once participants learn how it works, it becomes transparent to them to use. However, service interruptions by the municipality have caused participants to develop an awareness of the infrastructure's qualities. In the situations of infrastructural breakdown, the "infrastructural inversion" (Star & Bowker, 2006, p. 233) emerges as "an empirical condition" (Harvey et al., 2016, p. 4). This is because the essential relationships that the infrastructure relies on have been exposed during breakdowns. In these cases, it becomes clear that "stability is relative and needs to be produced in an ongoing manner through development and maintenance" (Karasti & Blomberg, 2018, p. 239).

Section 5.3

The challenges discussed earlier show context-specific design opportunities. These require validation across different NNs before broader application. Knowledge fragmentation could be addressed through the introduction of some tools. Mapping tools that help networks visualize their own capabilities and that are easy for members to update. Documentation tools that capture relational knowledge in accessible formats. Connection tools that amplify existing informal exchanges.

Coordination challenges reveal the need for decision-making tools for better group choices. Workload visualization tools can show how tasks are shared. Transition tools can also assist in handing off knowledge. These can support organic experiments already in place, like RC's seven-member governance model.

The network's perceived invisibility requires new approaches to communicate it to the broader public and measure its impact. They need story collection tools that describe distributed experiences and tools that help networks reflect on their own patterns, making the "forest that grows" (I4) visible. Future research will explore how PI might better support NNs while fostering IP. However, although another paper would be worth writing to describe them properly, many small acts of care determine RC's maintenance. This includes following up on commitments, welcoming newcomers, and documenting activities. Though these actions often go unnoticed, they constitute essential infrastructuring labor (Smedberg, 2022). The introduction of more complex tools poses questions regarding their maintenance and sustainability in the long term, as already documented in other community contexts (Bødker et al., 2016).

Moreover, this research suggests a different role for designers in supporting existing diffuse IP practices. This also raises important questions about how designers can get involved in NNs. They must do so without disrupting established social practices (Rossitto et al., 2021).

What would designers' roles be if it started from the assumption that communities already have infrastructuring capabilities? Do they only need to provide tools and build capacity to use them, or might designers have an embedded role in the long term? RC demonstrates how "purposeful

encounters" (Selloni, 2024, p.57) can emerge organically from network routines, suggesting that designers' support for NNs should respond to this existing collaborative momentum rather than attempt to orchestrate it. By combining PI and embedded design practices that explore how designers can contribute to diffuse IP processes, this research aims to develop strategies that respect emergent, self-organized practices while enhancing the capacity to address complex social challenges.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how NNs function as platforms for diffuse IP. They enable multiple forms of participation and collaboration to emerge through distributed practices. The 26-month study of RC demonstrates three empirical patterns through which participants develop collaborative capabilities without centralized coordination: cooperation without consensus, boundary crossing, and collective formation around matters of concern. These patterns emerge from five features of diffuse IP operating at different levels: distribution of agency, balance between autonomy and interdependence, multichannel relationships, structural openness, and fluid temporality. The case shows how NNs build resilience by sharing responsibility and creating adaptable structures that respond to changing conditions. In doing so, it adds to the literature on infrastructuring in PD by offering insights into "how collectives function and how they collaborate with one another amidst the interplay between everyday life and institutions, as well as the key challenges they encounter" (Huybrechts et al., 2025, "Summary of Challenges and Opportunities").

For Social and Participatory Design practitioners, the findings suggest moving from leadership to support roles when engaging with existing networks. Rather than imposing another designer-led platform that competes with them, interventions should support existing diffuse IP practices. While focusing on an Italian case, the idea of diffuse IP might fit other settings, especially those facing changes in welfare states and reduced public resources. The characteristics identified enable diverse stakeholders to come together and organize themselves to meet community needs. However, the relationship between diffuse IP enabling features and the practices observed proves more complex than simple causation. Features combine to generate practices in a dynamic way. Understanding their interplay and whether similar challenges exist across different contexts requires further comparative research.

While based on one case study, this research offers what Flyvbjerg (2006) would characterize as a paradigmatic case. Instead of trying to generalize how all NNs work, I recognize their differences. Because of its infrastructural qualities, each network is shaped by the existing base, connections to other structures, and conventions of practice. The value of this contribution lies not in universal claims about NNs. Instead, it suggests using infrastructuring as an analytical lens for design researchers to understand and support these networks.

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