

Reframing Participation: Inclusion and Democracy in Participatory Design

Beatrice Villari
Department of Design
Politecnico di Milano
Milan, Italy
beatrice.villari@polimi.it

Peter Scupelli
School of Design
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA, USA
scupelli@cmu.edu

Abstract

This paper introduces the key issues emerging from the conversation *Democracy and Participation: Inclusion* and discusses the main themes, tensions, and research trajectories developed across the contributions. The *Democracy and Participation: Inclusion* conversation brings together contributions that critically interrogate participation as a democratic and inclusive practice, demonstrating that inclusion cannot be treated as a methodological attribute (or a procedural requirement), it must be understood as political, relational, and infrastructural work that unfolds over long timeframes and is shaped by institutional constraints and inevitable compromises. Grounded in the established tradition of Participatory Design (PD), the selected papers collectively challenge instrumental, procedural, and depoliticized interpretations of participation. Instead, they frame inclusion as political, relational, and infrastructural work that unfolds over time and is shaped by institutional constraints, power asymmetries, and inevitable compromises. Across diverse issues, including migration and resettlement, incarceration, health and care, ageing, LGBTQ+ communities, and cultural institutions, the papers demonstrate that inclusion cannot be reduced to representation or access, but requires sustained attention to relational labor, temporal commitments, and the conditions that enable participation to endure. This paper synthesizes the main cross-cutting themes of the conversation and positions inclusion as a fragile, situated, and ongoing democratic obligation.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design; Collaborative and social computing.

Keywords

Insert participation, democracy, inclusion, participatory design

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1 Introduction

This Participatory Design (PD) has long been associated with democratic ideals, originating in workplace democracy movements in Scandinavia [3, 16]. Early PD theories framed participation as a means of redistributing power, explicitly positioning design as a political practice capable of challenging managerial control, technical rationalism, and the separation between experts and those most affected by design decisions [17, 19]. This tradition established a normative horizon: participation should enable people to shape the socio-technical conditions of their everyday lives.

Over time, critical studies of participatory practices have shown how participation can also become a new form of tyranny when it is used to legitimize predefined agendas, shift responsibilities onto communities without transferring power, or mask structural inequalities through the language of empowerment [11]. Moreover, inclusive aspirations may be undermined by subtle, yet persistent mechanisms of exclusion embedded in methods, contexts, organizational practices, communicative norms, and institutional constraints. Exclusion concerns not only who participates and in what role, but also how participation itself is configured: what counts as legitimate contribution, which forms of knowledge are recognized, and which risks and costs participants are expected to bear [9, 33].

In response, several scholars have called for renewed attention to power, care, and long-term commitment [7, 8]. These reflections entail a number of conceptual shifts: a move from designing discrete artifacts to designing socio-material configurations and publics; the recognition that participation is not merely a matter of methods, but of complex relationships; and an awareness that inclusivity requires attentiveness to difference, conflict, and histories of marginalization rather than assumptions of consensus or neutrality [28, 29, 34].

A crucial and often underestimated consequence is that inclusion does not fail only “at the door,” but also within participatory processes themselves. Holone and Herstad [22] show how PD in contexts of severe disability necessarily involves tensions and compromises that must be treated as design material rather than methodological failure. Similarly, Hodson et al. [23] discuss how participation varies across phases and through the involvement of proxies and institutions, reframing inclusion as a question of process governance and accountability.

The *Democracy and Participation: Inclusion* conversation aligns with this critical trajectory. Rather than focusing on how to involve more people, the papers ask: who is participation for, whose knowledge counts, what kinds of labor sustain participatory processes, and how inclusion can be pursued under structural inequality. Collectively, they position inclusion as a situated, relational,

and infrastructural challenge that exceeds representation and demands long-term institutional engagement. To make this argument explicit, the paper proceeds in two steps: Section 2 defines the interpretive categories that organize the conversation within the broader PD debate; Section 3 then operationalizes those categories empirically across the ten papers. Next, we provide overviews of the ten papers.

1.1 Ten paper overviews

Processed In *Rethinking Participatory Design as a Political and Pluralistic Practice: Agonistic Coexistence in Prison*, Maramotti and Chiaravalloti investigate a storytelling initiative centered on the “20 Consigli” (“20 Tips”) activity within an Italian prison ward for young adults. The project transformed a basic list of advice for new inmates into a platform for dialogue, reflection, and contestation. Grounded in the theory of agonistic pluralism, the research rejects solutionist design paradigms that prioritize consensus, arguing instead that dissensus and pluralism are generative forces for coexistence in total institutions. The list of tips served as a boundary object, allowing participants with conflicting mindsets, such as a generational clash over how to handle anger, to recognize one another as legitimate adversaries rather than enemies. Ultimately, the study advocates for a re-politicization of participatory design that values the process of democratic inquiry and embodied knowledge over finalized artifacts. This contribution primarily informs the interpretive categories of pluralism, conflict, and the re-politicization of participation.

In REVERSELAB. Reclaiming Space and Relations in Prison through Art and Participation: Designing for Dialogue and Coexistence in San Vittore prison, Ligi and Piredda describe a situated design-research project that involved the recovery and reactivation of an abandoned basement ward in Milan’s San Vittore Prison. The multidisciplinary team collaborated with incarcerated workers to transform the site into a space for artistic production and civic dialogue. The project utilized spatial reactivation and multi-voiced sound installations to enact a form of polyphonic testimony, allowing a “Chorus” of fragmented inmate memories to fill former cells. A defining feature of the initiative was the orchestration of guided public openings, which tested the “civic permeability” of the prison by inviting external citizens to engage with detainees acting as hosts and guides. The paper proposes the project as a prototype for relational infrastructures of coexistence, demonstrating how design can rework carceral institutions from within. This contribution primarily addresses infrastructuring, agonistic visibility, and institutions as ambivalent design materials.

In *Hearing Materials, Feeling Participation, Caring for Personhood: Situated Lessons from Participatory Design with Nonverbal Participants*, De Coen, Vetter, and Nieuwenhuis describe a study with persons with late-stage dementia or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities (PIMD), and explore how participatory design can research personhood when verbal communication is no longer possible. The authors argue that participation in these contexts is felt rather than spoken, registered through micro-gestures, rhythms, and atmospheres. Drawing on situated examples, such as recognizing a resident’s counting habit through the introduction of tactile plastic rings, the study proposes three “practical handles”:

interweaving researcher/material positionality, maintaining spatial/relational proximity, and practicing collaborative interpretation. The research critiques techno-solutionism and advocates a posthumanist lens that values the agency of mundane materials (e.g., light, tissues, doormats) in configuring care. This contribution primarily informs the categories of more-than-verbal participation, care, and relational inclusion.

In *Infrastructuring Participatory Scaffolds with People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in Community Gallery* Chen, Fu, Sato, Chen, and Barbareschi describe a one-year service design study in a Japanese community gallery with co-designed adaptive art workshops to include individuals with profound intellectual disabilities (PIDs) in cultural life. The researchers implemented a four-phase framework consisting of (1) co-designing workshops with stakeholders, (2) art creation by participants with PIDs, (3) public exhibitions, and (4) thematically aligned replica workshops for the general public. By using material and relational scaffolds, such as handprint templates or fabric collages tailored to sensory capacities, the project translated embodied expressions into forms of public legibility. The study demonstrates how PIDs can move from the periphery to the center of community networks through “infrastructural patience” and the alignment of diverse stakeholder expertise. This paper especially contributes to the categories of infrastructuring, mediation, and long temporalities.

In *Participatory Design for Intergenerational Dialogue: How the Voice® Model Can Foster a Longevity Society in the Italian Context*, Borghi, Ferrarini, Leonardi, Butcher, Cosheril, Corner, and Palmarini explore how participatory design (PD) can challenge systemic ageism and foster a longevity-ready society. It introduces the Voice® model, a global ecosystem that uses user-centered research to amplify the perspectives of older adults within intergenerational settings. The research demonstrates how everyday spaces, such as a local food market, can become hubs for social innovation. The market project engaged residents of all ages in redesigning services, eventually leading to the opening of a permanent orientation service for caregivers and older adults. The authors argue that PD rooted in intergenerational inclusion functions as cross-sectoral infrastructure that creates shared social value across the public and private sectors. This contribution primarily informs the categories of long-term institutional responsibility, infrastructuring, and relational continuity.

In *Resettlement Work: Accounting for the Invisible Work of Refugee Community Health Workers* situated in Kentucky, USA, Peer describes an ethnographic study that examines the relational labor of Community Health Workers (CHWs) supporting refugee communities. The author conceptualizes this labor as “Resettlement Work,” identifying it as a distinctive form of “infrastructure” grounded in trust and cultural mediation. The findings highlight how CHWs perform invisible design moves, such as navigating unfamiliar bureaucracies, managing documentation, and acting as privacy navigators for clients on digital platforms. The paper characterizes this labor as a specialized form of frontline care that exceeds formal job descriptions. The research calls for the co-design of refugee resettlement infrastructures that explicitly resource and sustain this critical but unacknowledged care labor. This paper mainly informs the categories of invisible labour, care, and infrastructural maintenance.

In *Encountering, Engaging with and Nurturing Relations in PD Processes – An Explorative Approach to Relational Work and Reflexivity*, Dzierzak, Grönvall, and Marttila investigate the fragile early stages of participatory design by focusing on how researchers encounter and nurture professional relationships in Nordic municipal care contexts. Through a tri-ethnographic reflection, the authors identify dimensions of “relational work,” such as legacy work (balancing past relations), anticipation work (attuning to future needs), and “invisible designing.” The study proposes an explorative lens using the metaphor of the “face”, specifically the “formal face” (academic credibility) and “informal face” (everyday vulnerability), to describe how researchers attune to social contingencies. By naming these characteristics, the paper aims to expand the relational language of PD and make the affective labor of relationship-building more legible. This contribution is central for the categories of reflexivity, methodological positioning, and invisible relational labour.

In *Rebuilding Place, Reframing Identity: Participatory visual and environmental tools for intercultural and marginalised communities*, Hosszu and Jekli focus on young refugees and unaccompanied minors in Hungary. This research examines how placemaking and visual communication support integration. The authors present a two-volume toolkit developed over ten years of practice-based research: *Rebuilding*, which focuses on the physical environment for place attachment, and *Open Doors*, which uses visual tools to foster social connection. The toolkit utilizes low-threshold design methods, such as stencils and modular fonts, to help participants overcome language barriers. Case studies show that repeated, small-scale acts of personalization, such as customizing bedside lamps or bedroom doors, cultivate a sense of ownership and safety for youth experiencing “loss of place”. This paper mainly contributes to the categories of temporality, care, and participatory rebuilding under conditions of displacement.

In *Participatory Design through the Lenses of Women Architects and Designers*, Lampert, Tonetto, and de Souza Libânio describe twelve in-depth interviews with professionals across Europe and South America. This study explores how women architects and designers navigate systemic barriers while advancing participatory design as a pathway to inclusive societies. The research identifies core competencies, such as empathetic listening, multicultural knowledge, and transdisciplinary collaboration that challenge traditional hierarchical structures in the field. By drawing on their embodied knowledge and gendered experiences of care and exclusion, these professionals act as catalysts for change, leading projects that range from designing safer public spaces for women to creating accessible environments for neurodivergent students. The paper argues that their practice constitutes a political and ethical stance that centres on pluralism and social justice. This contribution primarily informs the category of positioning and the re-politicization of the designer’s role.

In *Queer, hybrid participatory design: Relational practices and norms for coalition building with rural LGBTQ+ communities*, Lawrence, Boyle, Mayo, Rushworth, Anderson, Wallis, and Walters analyze the first-year of a hybrid PD project with an LGBTQ+ community coalition in rural northern Utah. Utilizing queer relationality theory, the authors examine how hybrid spaces were adapted to prioritize intimacy, desire, and joy over traditional productivity-centered models. The study details the co-creation of community

norms, distinguishing between “fixed safety” (that protect members from risk) and “fluid engagement” (flexible participation styles such as chat, emojis, or silence). By framing technology and planning as relational practices, the research demonstrates how these co-created norms provide a necessary infrastructure for coexistence, sustaining collective agency in geographically isolated and conservative regions. This paper chiefly informs the categories of queer relationality, norm-making, and infrastructural support for coalition building.

1.2 Geographies

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The ten papers in the *Democracy and Participation: Inclusion conversation* span a wide range of geographic settings, moving across urban and rural contexts in Europe, North America, South America, and Asia, and highlighting how participatory design practices are shaped by place-specific social, institutional, and cultural conditions.

The European context is widely represented. In Hungary, *Rebuilding Place, Reframing Identity: Participatory visual and environmental tools for intercultural and marginalised communities* frames the country as a key transit zone within the EU, grounding its analysis in fieldwork conducted in diverse locations, including urban shelters in Budapest, rural villages such as Ágasegyháza and Tiszadob, and other towns such as Fót, Debrecen, Vámoszabadi, Tokaj, and Kőszeg.

Italy emerges as a particularly dense site of inquiry, with Milan functioning as a central hub. *Participatory Design for Intergenerational Dialogue: how the Voice® model can foster a longevity society in the Italian context* focuses on a citizen engagement process developed in Milan, while also referring to collaborative work with the Municipality and Province of Sondrio on a strategic ageing plan. The Italian penitentiary system is examined through *Rethinking Participatory Design as a political and pluralistic practice: Agonistic coexistence in prison*, which analyses a participatory design initiative within San Vittore prison in central Milan, presenting the facility as emblematic of broader systemic tensions. Similarly, *REVERSELAB. Reclaiming Space and Relations in Prison through Art and Participation: Designing for Dialogue and Coexistence in San Vittore prison* is situated inside the same historic prison, focusing specifically on an abandoned basement ward located in the heart of the city.

In Belgium, *Hearing Materials, Feeling Participation, Caring for Personhood: Situated Lessons from Participatory Design with Non-verbal Participants* is situated within professional care facilities in Brussels, examining dementia and PIMD care through residents’ interactions with their immediate indoor environments.

The Nordic region is addressed in *Encountering, Engaging with, and Nurturing Relations in PD Processes: An Explorative Approach to Relational Work and Reflexivity*, which draws on municipal care settings across Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, including a home care office in Motala, Sweden.

Beyond Europe, several papers engage explicitly with transnational and extra-European settings. *Participatory Design through the Lenses of Women Architects and Designers* adopts a transnational professional perspective, drawing on interviews with practitioners based in Ireland, Italy, France, Scotland, England, and Brazil. The study includes perspectives from Brazil, situating professional trajectories within specific socio-cultural and spatial conditions.

In North America, *Queer, hybrid participatory design: Relational practices and norms for coalition building with rural, LGBTQ+ communities* focuses on the Bear River Region in rural Northern Utah, specifically Cache, Box Elder, and Rich counties, an area marked by geographic isolation and limited access to LGBTQ+-specific services. *Resettlement Work: Accounting for the Invisible Work of Refugee Community Health Workers* is situated in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and examines refugee resettlement practices in the state's host, noting Kentucky's high per-capita refugee resettlement rates, with specific reference to the Kentucky Office for Refugees in Louisville.

Finally, the Asian context is represented through *Infrastructuring Participatory Scaffolds with People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in Community Gallery*, which is situated in a community gallery in suburban Japan, within a city of approximately 200,000 inhabitants and characterized by a high concentration of welfare institutions.

Together, these geographically diverse cases explore heterogeneous spatial, institutional, and cultural landscapes, while remaining attentive to the situated conditions that outline different approaches and perspectives on inclusion.

2 Interpretive Categories for Reading Inclusion in Participatory Processes

The papers in the conversation span several research areas, which can be outlined through five interpretive categories that map the content and reflections that emerged. In continuity with the PD tradition, which considers design as a process of negotiation and conflict [6, 31], these categories function as interpretive lenses that enable the papers to be read within the disciplinary debate. We use the term 'interpretive categories' here to indicate conceptual lenses derived from the PD literature; Section 3 then mobilizes these categories empirically across the ten papers.

First, participation can be interpreted as relational and material infrastructuring rather than as an event or method. Within this perspective, originally articulated by Star and Ruhleder [32] and further developed in PD by Karasti [23], Björgvinsson et al. [4], and Dantec and DiSalvo [24], participation is understood as a set of relationships, practices, and material conditions that must be constructed, maintained, and adapted over time. The emphasis shifts from the mere presence of participants to the sustainability of the conditions that make participation possible.

Second, inclusion can be interpreted through care, maintenance, and invisible labour. Feminist and care-oriented conversations in PD have highlighted how participation is sustained by invisible, affective, and relational labor, often less recognized as part of the project, yet essential to its democratic practice [25, 35]. From this perspective, inclusion emerges from everyday practices of attentiveness, maintenance, and shared responsibility. In particular,

the "politics of care" foregrounds a shift from designing objects to co-designing future social relations, rendering ethical-political responsibility a structural dimension of PD.

Third, participation can be interpreted beyond verb-centric and deliberative models. Work influenced by post-humanist, decolonial, and queer perspectives demonstrates how such models can generate exclusion [1, 2, 12, 18, 30]. From this angle, participation may also emerge through bodies, affects, materials, spatial arrangements, temporalities, and more-than-human presences. This reframing is crucial when inclusion is pursued with people whose participation does not conform to dominant communicative norms.

Fourth, inclusion can be interpreted agonistically, that is, through pluralism, dissensus, and the political nature of participation. Agonistic PD treats conflict not as a problem to be resolved, but as a constitutive condition of democratic practice [5, 13, 30, 31, 33]. From this perspective, inclusion does not coincide with consensus, but with the possibility of coexisting dissent and a plurality of irreconcilable positions.

Fifth, inclusion can be interpreted temporally, as something that unfolds through continuity, repetition, and institutional commitment rather than punctual involvement. Temporal lenses in PD challenge extractive and event-oriented approaches and reaffirm the necessity of sustained commitments and distributed responsibility over time [32].

Alongside these five categories, the conversation also foregrounds two cross-cutting concerns. One concerns governance and compromise: inclusion appears as a field of structural tensions that cannot be eliminated, but must instead be rendered visible, discussed, and taken up as the very material of design. Hodson et al. [23] extend this reflection to the processual dimension, highlighting how participation may vary across project phases and how representatives' and institutions' roles concretely shape who is included. Inclusion thus emerges as a matter of governance and accountability.

The other concerns positioning and institutions. On the one hand, there is the re-politicization of the designer's role, understood as a situated and responsible actor whose choices concretely shape who can participate and under what conditions, aligning with critiques of designer neutrality in PD [10, 20]. On the other hand, institutions are understood as design materials, capable of both producing exclusion and sustaining durable inclusive processes, reinforcing a view of PD as a practice that operates within and against institutions [15].

In this dual direction, perspectives on commoning and relational ontology further reformulate the problem of inclusion: rather than merely "giving voice" or "expanding access," inclusion involves producing and sustaining relations that constitute collective subjects and shared capacities for action. Marttila et al. [26] describe the "relational becoming" of the participatory design commoner and show how the participatory designer is implicated in the production of shared subjectivities (the "collective designer") through infrastructuring and affective engagements. In this framing, inclusion also concerns who can become part of the "we" that designs, under what conditions, and with which reciprocal obligations.

Taken together, these interpretive categories articulate the Democracy and Participation: Inclusion conversation in which inclusion is not an objective to be achieved, but a situated, fragile,

and continuously negotiated process. Section 3 expands on these categories and demonstrates how they are applied in the empirical and methodological contexts discussed by the ten contributions.

3 Operationalizing Participation under Constraint: Pluralism, Care, time, and Positioning

Building on the interpretive categories outlined above, this section operationalizes them empirically across the papers in the *Democracy and Participation: Inclusion* conversation. Across diverse empirical sites and experiences, participation is enacted not as an idealized democratic procedure but as a situated practice shaped by conflict, dependency, institutional limits, and unequal capacities to act. Rather than repeating the paper overviews, this section compares them, showing how the conversation advances PD research under constrained conditions.

3.1 Participation, Pluralism, and Conflict: Beyond Consensus

This first strand operationalizes the interpretive category of agonistic participation. The papers explicitly challenge the assumption that democratic participation should aim at agreement, shared understanding, or convergence of interests. Instead, participation is framed as a space where disagreement, contradiction, and irreconcilable positions are not only inevitable but also politically meaningful.

Rethinking Participatory Design as a Political and Pluralistic Practice: Agonistic Coexistence in Prison offers an explicit theoretical articulation of Participatory Design as an agonistic practice. Through the case of a narrative workshop in prison and the work of the “20 Councils,” the authors show how participation can become a space of coexistence in disagreement. Rather than synthesizing or neutralising conflicting voices, the process holds them together as expressions of democratic plurality, in which participation is about sustaining conditions in which dissent can be expressed and recognised as legitimate.

This perspective aligns closely with the empirical findings from *REVERSELAB. Reclaiming Space and Relations in Prison through Art and Participation: Designing for Dialogue and Coexistence in San Vittore prison*. In this project, an artistic approach enables incarcerated people to reappear as political and narrative subjects. Design does not produce consensus or solutions; instead, it opens a space of visibility and testimony that unsettles institutional logics of invisibilization. In both cases, inclusion does not coincide with pacified integration, but with the right to exist publicly, even in conflict.

Together, these contributions engage with agonistic traditions in PD and democratic theory [5, 14, 27, 28], reinforcing an understanding of design as democratic inquiry rather than problem-solving. Participation is understood as a practice that legitimizes dissent and foregrounds the intrinsically political character of designing participation.

3.2 More-than-Verbal Participation and Relational Inclusion

This second strand operationalizes the interpretive category of participation beyond deliberative and verb-centric models. The papers argue that democratic participation cannot be reduced to speech, rational argumentation, or the articulation of preferences. Such models implicitly exclude those whose participation does not conform to dominant communicative norms.

Hearing Materials, Feeling Participation, Caring for Personhood: Situated Lessons from Participatory Design with Nonverbal Participants proposes a reconceptualization of participation through work with people with profound intellectual disabilities and advanced dementia. In this context, participation takes shape through minimal gestures, rhythms, materials, and affective cues. Participation requires continuous interpretive work by caregivers, designers, and institutions. Personhood is not assumed as a precondition but is continually sustained through relational practices.

A related perspective emerges in *Infrastructuring Participatory Scaffolds with People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in a Community Gallery*, where participation is enabled by scaffolds that precede and accompany action. Here, the mere presence of participants constitutes a contribution, demonstrating that inclusion is a collective, mediated accomplishment rather than an individual capacity.

These reflections resonate with *Participatory Design for Intergenerational Dialogue: How the Voice® Model Can Foster a Longevity Society in the Italian Context*, which posits that intergenerational dialogue is sustained by socio-technical infrastructures that enable reciprocal listening over time. Across these cases, inclusion emerges as a relational approach grounded in interdependence. Methodologically, these papers also demonstrate that research in constrained contexts relies on situated interpretation, distributed sense-making, and the design of conditions for legibility rather than solely on direct elicitation.

3.3 Invisible Labour, Affectivity, and Care as Democratic Infrastructures

This third strand operationalizes the interpretive category of care and invisible labour. A recurring theme across the conversation is the recognition of invisible, affective, and relational labor as foundational to participation. In *Resettlement Work: Accounting for the Invisible Work of Refugee Community Health Workers* Peer makes visible the everyday work of CHWs supporting refugees. Cultural translation, emotional accompaniment, and informal coordination are essential for inclusion, yet they are often overlooked by institutions and in participation metrics.

Complementing this perspective, *Encountering, Engaging with, and Nurturing Relations in PD Processes* examines relational work in early PD phases, introducing concepts such as anticipation work, nurturing work, and relational failure. Participation is described as a fragile process that requires time, attentiveness, and a willingness to engage with breakdown and uncertainty.

Rebuilding Place, Reframing Identity: Participatory visual and environmental tools for intercultural and marginalised communities further demonstrates that participatory placemaking involving young refugees is sustained by trust built over time. Across these

cases, inclusion appears as a practice of care. Democracy is thus reframed as the everyday work of maintenance rather than episodic intervention, echoing care-oriented understandings of infrastructural ethics [14, 28].

3.4 Long Temporalities and Institutional Responsibility

This fourth strand operationalizes the interpretive category of temporality. The papers collectively show that inclusion emerges only through continuity, repetition, and sustained institutional commitments.

Within this perspective, *Participatory Design for Intergenerational Dialogue: How the Voice® Model Can Foster a Longevity Society in the Italian Context* highlights how combining in-person participation, digital tools, and organizational networks enables participants' experiences, particularly those of older adults, to translate into actions, services, and decisions over time. Participation requires and supports continuity, trust, and shared responsibility in reshaping relationships among the various actors involved.

A similar temporal logic appears in *Rebuilding Place, Reframing Identity: Participatory visual and environmental tools for intercultural and marginalised communities*, where participation is approached as a spatial, symbolic, and relational practice that supports long-term reconstruction of belonging in contexts marked by displacement and marginalization. Agency and recognition emerge not through punctual interventions but through durable participatory environments in which visual tools, placemaking practices, and creative activities mediate expression, memory, and collective imagination.

Infrastructuring Participation Scaffolding with People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities in Community Gallery also demonstrates that inclusion depends on slow alignment work among stakeholders, caregivers, material supports, and public-facing formats. Across these contributions, institutions can be considered as ambivalent design materials: they can generate exclusion, yet they are indispensable for sustaining inclusive processes over time. PD thus emerges as a practice that interrogates and reconfigures institutional responsibility, in line with infrastructuring perspectives.

3.5 Positioning, Gender, and the Re-politicization of the Designer's Role

This fifth strand operationalizes the interpretive category of positioning. In *Participatory Design through the Lenses of Women Architects and Designers*, participatory practices are read through gendered experiences and trajectories of professional marginalization, showing how PD functions not merely as a method but an ethical-political stance.

This perspective aligns with feminist approaches to design and PD that challenge assumptions of designer neutrality and emphasize that all design practices are situated, embodied, and entangled with power relations [22, 28]. The designer emerges as a positioned subject whose history, identity, and institutional location directly shape what becomes participable, visible, or legitimate.

This re-politicization of the designer's role also appears across other contributions, where reflexivity, positionality, and responsibility are treated as conditions for inclusion. Designers are not presented as neutral facilitators but as situated actors whose choices, regarding timeframes, formats, languages, and institutional alliances, concretely shape who can participate and under what conditions [21, 35].

3.6 Methodological implications: researching PD in constrained contexts

Across the conversation, a further contribution concerns not only what inclusion means, but how PD research must be conducted when participation is fragile, mediated, or institutionally constrained. The papers suggest at least three methodological implications.

First, research methods must often be adapted from elicitation to attunement: participation may need to be sensed, interpreted, scaffolded, or mediated rather than directly verbalized. This is especially evident in the papers on nonverbal participants, profound intellectual disabilities, and hybrid LGBTQ+ coalition building. Second, constrained contexts require extended commitments and iterative negotiation. Contributions show that field access, trust, and participation are not prerequisites but outcomes of long-term relational work. This is particularly visible in prison, refugee support, care, and placemaking contexts.

Third, methodological reflexivity becomes a substantive democratic issue rather than a procedural appendix. Choices about proxies, formats, timing, institutional partners, and representational practices shape the conditions of inclusion itself. In this sense, the conversation advances PD methodology by considering democratic responsibility as embedded in research and participatory practices, so they cannot be separated.

4 Reflections: Continuing to Operate a Critical Practice

Taken together, the contributions to the *Democracy and Participation: Inclusion* conversation invite an understanding of inclusion not as an attribute to be added to participatory processes, but as a condition that must be actively constructed and sustained over time. Inclusion requires ongoing attention to access thresholds, emotional and material costs, and forms of exclusion that arise even within explicitly democratic initiatives.

From this perspective, Participatory Design is called to engage not only with who participates, but with the models, infrastructures, and institutional arrangements through which participation becomes possible, is sustained, or is interrupted. Inclusion is shown to depend on situated practices of care, mediation, and responsibility, as well as on accepting incompleteness, conflict, and dependency as constitutive dimensions of democratic life.

Continuing to operate PD as a critical practice, therefore, means resisting procedural or instrumental reductions of participation. It involves making visible the material, relational, temporal, and institutional conditions that produce inclusion or exclusion, and acknowledging the compromises that traverse participatory work. Inclusion is not a stable achievement but an ongoing obligation,

one that demands reflexivity, accountability, and collective responsibility.

In this sense, the conversation reaffirms a foundational statement of Participatory Design: participation is always a matter of democracy. At the same time, it extends the debate in the community by arguing that democracy itself must be understood as fragile, situated, and contested, maintained through continuous work that must be reinforced and (re)negotiated over time. What the conversation ultimately makes visible is that inclusion is neither a methodological guarantee nor a final state, but an ongoing democratic achievement sustained through infrastructuring, care, pluralism, and reflexive positioning.

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