

# Guerrilla Research Actions for Reflexivity: Engaging Design Communities in Informal Spaces of Dialogue and Self-positioning

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## Abstract

In the contemporary landscape marked by systemic crises and complex interdependencies, participatory design faces the critical task of cultivating designers' consciousness regarding their roles, privileges, and relational positions. This paper investigates reflective, positional, and relational practices implemented through a Guerrilla Research Action at Politecnico di Milano. By situating an anonymous, interactive installation within everyday spaces of the campus, the action facilitated self-reflection among participants, including students, professors, professionals, and visitors, on personal and professional identities, team dynamics, and systemic power structures. Conceived as a form of participation in the broadest sense, the guerrilla action invited participants to engage in a process of auto-ethnographic reflection - a situated inquiry into one's own positioning and identity within design processes. Rather than focusing on pragmatic toolkits for co-design facilitation, this research highlights the significance of designerly reflexivity before, during, and after participatory engagements. Insights gathered from participant interactions underscore the transformative potential of reflective practices in enhancing designers' awareness, empathy, and responsibility. In this sense, the guerrilla action serves as a micro-infrastructure enabling recognition across differences, contributing to the discourse on participatory design as a relational process that fosters inclusion and equity through heightened self-awareness and systemic thinking.

## CCS Concepts

• Human-centred computing; • Collaborative and social computing; • Collaborative and social computing design and evaluation methods; • Ethnographic studies;

## Keywords

Participatory Design, Reflective Practices, Positionality, Relationality, Conscious Design, Guerrilla Action, Systemic Thinking

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## 1 Introduction

The urgency for reflexivity, positionality, and relationality within participatory design emerges from the increasingly entangled crises defining our era: climate breakdown, social inequality, digital acceleration, and epistemic fragmentation [1]. In this context, participatory design must move beyond inclusion as representation, toward participation as relational awareness and shared responsibility. This paper investigates how creative participatory research actions and methods can support reflective practices, deepening designers' understanding of their positional roles within participatory processes and highlighting the importance of cultivating inner awareness as a foundation for systemic change [2].

This paper reports on a Guerrilla Research Action (GRA): an anonymous, month-long participatory installation staged in an everyday university transit space. Through low-threshold visual prompts and sticker-based micro-gestures, participants were invited to self-position on identity, privilege, collaboration, and responsibility.

Taking inspiration from the so-called peaceful guerrilla movement, which is “a style or attitude to making interventions in urban spaces (Guerrilla Gardening being one such example)” [3], the Guerrilla Research Action presented in this paper serves as a micro-infrastructure for reflexivity that makes collective self-reflection visible and discussable in situ.

## 2 BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

This section outlines the theoretical foundations that frame the Guerrilla Research Action (GRA), defined as informal and distributed forms of participation, situating it within the broader discourse on participatory and systemic design. It traces the evolution of participatory design (PD) from its democratic and political origins to its contemporary rearticulations as a relational, systemic, and reflexive practice. By combining insights from participatory, co-design, and systemic design literatures, it positions the GRA as a micro-intervention that bridges inner transformation and collective awareness.

### 2.1 From Democratic Ideals to Reflexive Participation

Participatory Action Research (PAR), emerging in the 1940s, is oriented toward social action and change, bringing researchers and