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**DESIGNING  
AND  
MAKING**



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**PAD**

via Francesco Soave 15 – 20135 Milano – Italy  
via Roma 171 – 90133 Palermo – Italy  
[info@padjournal.net](mailto:info@padjournal.net) – [editors@padjournal.net](mailto:editors@padjournal.net)

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**SELECTIVE  
VALUES,  
MEANINGS,  
AND ETHICS  
EMBEDDED IN  
MAKING AND  
MATERIALITY**

# Weaving Relationships and Intangible Meanings as Collective Making

## Knitting Design as Social Generativity in the Methexis Project

### **Martina Motta**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid Id 0000-0003-2894-4145

### **Mariana Ciancia**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid Id 0000-0001-8509-3776

### **Giovanni Maria Conti**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid Id 0000-0003-2451-4172

### **Francesca Piredda**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid Id 0000-0003-0623-8450

### **Chiara Ligi**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid Id 0009-0009-5647-265X

### **Anna Doneda**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid Id 0009-0007-4302-6162

### **Keywords**

Collective Making, Knit Design, Story-Based Design, Participatory Practices, Design for Social Impact.

### **Abstract**

This article explores knitting design as a practice of social generativity, emphasizing how the wider process around the act of “making” goes beyond mere material production to become a powerful tool for building relationships, communities, and social capital. Starting from a theoretical framework through the results of experimental research, it examines the cultural, ethical, and methodological significance of knitting in vulnerable social contexts, interpreting the technique as a generative action able to create a “social fabric” through participatory practices. The article presents the exhibition *The Five Knots of Well-being*, one of the outcomes of the Methexis project, funded by the Polisocial Award 2023, which used mathematical models and narrative methods to represent social ties in San Vittore prison’s Young Adults section. The exhibition provided an interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data into multisensory physical patterns and sound, fostering reflection on the ethical meaning of making. Knitting emerges as a tool for communication, mediation, and inclusion, embodying social networks and fostering awareness of marginalized realities, linked to responsible, socially engaged design.

## 1. Introduction

The role of “making” in contemporary design emerges as a constantly evolving field, where the material dimension of the object gradually gives way to a social, cultural, and ethical dimension. While the history of design has often oscillated between a focus on the product and that on the process, the act of “making” in design progressively emerged as a relational and generative practice, capable of impacting the quality of relationships and collective well-being.

From this perspective, design is no longer simply an exercise in form or function, but becomes an evolving “design thought”, as defined by Andrea Branzi interviewed by Poncellini.

Poncellini (2022, p. 9) then notes how this design thought is the action of applying thought to the project, in a continuous and infinite present in which this action “is constantly nourished [...] more collaborative, more open to new configurations, and [...] to receive the active contribution of the young generations.”

This understanding resonates with Tim Ingold’s conceptualization of making as an open-ended, processual mode of engagement with the world. In *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), Ingold critiques the hylo-morphic model that separates form and matter, and advocates for a perspective in which making is a correspondence – a mutual becoming – between people, materials, gestures, and the environment.

This concept can be read as consonant with the “design thought” evoked by Branzi that is bottom-up and collective,

tied to society, recalling Walker's idea that "we must always speak of design in society, rather than design and society" (Walker, 1989, p. 68).

The conceptual framework of this article is drawn on this relational view of design in society, where the individual is understood as an "individual-in-relation" (Donati, 2013). Within this relational perspective, knitting emerges in this article as a generative and collective practice capable of weaving emotional and social connections, creating a "social fabric" through shared gestures and material engagement.

With knitting, the act of making becomes a means of collective participation, where repetition, tactile involvement, and simple techniques foster dialogue and inclusion (Corkhill et al., 2014; Hemmings, 2019), impacting the act of meaning-making. These characteristics allow knit design to be reinterpreted from a traditional craft into a socially engaged practice – aligned with Ingold's view of making as an emergent process in which materials, people, stories, and temporalities co-constitute one another – and to explore it not only as an aesthetic or technical language but as a form of social generativity in vulnerable and dynamic contexts.

In light of these premises, the present article discusses the results of the *Methexis* project and the related exhibition *The Five Knots of Well-being* (March 2025), with two interconnected aims: to explore how the act of knitting can materialize and communicate intangible relational dynamics within the prison environment; and to examine how design practices

grounded in making can contribute to social awareness and inclusion. By articulating these objectives, the article positions knit design as a critical and ethical practice capable of revealing and reshaping the relational fabric of vulnerable communities.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Social Role of Design and Making

In this article, the contemporary debate on the role of making intertwines with that on design's social responsibility. Since the 1970s, authors such as Viktor Papanek and Riccardo Dalisi have highlighted design's capacity to influence social processes beyond production. Papanek argued that design could serve as a tool for social transformation, prioritizing the common good (Papanek, 1971).

In the same period, significant projects emerged, such as Dalisi's 1971 initiative in Naples' Rione Traiano neighborhood, where he engaged local children and university students in creative collaboration (Parlato et al., 2020).

Through this work, Dalisi used design to foster imagination, collective spirit, and social redemption among marginalized youth (Dalisi, 1975), anticipating approaches that underpin today's social design.

These early experiments established the foundation for contemporary social design practices, yet the theoretical depth required to understand making as a relational and generative process is strongly expanded by Tim Ingold's work. Ingold challenges traditional views of making as a unidirectional im-

position of form on passive matter. Instead, he conceptualizes making as a process of correspondence, in which makers respond to the materials, constraints, and rhythms of the world.

This view reframes making from an act of control to one of attentive engagement, resonating closely with participatory and community-based design practices.

As anticipated in the Introduction, the second key concept for the framework of this article is Donati's (2013) idea of society not as the sum of isolated actors, but as the result of the relationships that generate shared relational goods.

This view is crucial for social design, as it moves the value of design from products to the networks, connections, and shared meanings it generates (Doneda, 2024). This relational understanding reframes making as a collaborative and socially generative practice, a device that fosters connections and shared meaning. The literature on participatory design and social innovation (Meroni, 2007) highlights the designer's role as a facilitator of inclusive processes that create value through relationships rather than products. Manual making, therefore, becomes an act of belonging and a new opportunity for collective action, strengthening the community dimension. Ettore Sottsass reinforces this view when he writes: "I'd like to find a place where we can try, together, to make things [...] certainly not for ourselves, nor even to give them to others, but to experience *how* to make things" (Sottsass, 1973, p. 7). Echoing Ingold, this view puts the emphasis on making as an experiential, shared, and meaningful experience, beyond the logic of the product.

All these ideas converge in recognizing making as a cultural and critical practice through which design fosters reflection, shared learning, and new visions of social reality. Framed in the phenomenology of practice, making is not simply producing, but moving along lines, weaving correspondences, and engaging ethically with the material and social world (Ingold, 2007); collectively, it becomes a critical language that questions dominant cultural, economic, and political models, and opens pathways toward more inclusive and responsible practices.

## 2.2. Knitting as a Social and Generative Practice

Knitting fits this framework as an exemplary practice. Once a domestic and individual activity, it has evolved into a participatory and inclusive medium that can forge connections and materialize relational dynamics.

Beyond its symbolic value, it embodies an ethical and methodological dimension of manual labor: repetitive gestures, tactile engagement, and technical simplicity can foster dialogue and inclusion, engaging even those in vulnerable conditions (Corkhill et al., 2013; Hemmings, 2019).

The act of interweaving threads, shared in a collective context, makes relational dynamics visible and allows an everyday gesture to be transformed into an act of social construction.

With a broader perspective, we can refer to Ingold's reflection on relationality, which is not only social but also material: makers enter into correspondence with the material world, forming what he terms "meshworks" of lines (Ingold, 2007). In *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), Ingold describes life, movement, and making as constituted by interweaving lines rather

than discrete objects, while in *The Textility of Making* (2010), he conceptualizes making as a practice rooted in lines, textures, and tensions.

Here, textiles represent not only a craft domain but a paradigm for understanding making as an unfolding movement: a dynamic interplay of rhythms, resistances, and attentional attunement.

Knitting thus becomes a paradigmatic example of Ingold's notion of textility and meshwork: a form of making in which lines come together, diverge, and interact, generating both material artefacts and social relations.

Within this perspective, *Craftivism* – a term coined by Betsy Greer (2003; 2014) – uses manual practices such as knitting, sewing, and embroidery to convey social and political messages, encouraging creative action as a means of raising awareness and inspiring dialogue (Greer, 2014).

As Kate Bingaman Burt stated in her TEDx Talk (TEDx Talks, 2013), “making with active intention is a political act, no matter how big or small your intention is,” underscoring the transformative power of conscious making.

Related to this, guerrilla knitting, or yarn bombing, brings textile expression into public spaces as a critical and poetic protest, subverting expectations tied to “feminine” crafts. Both craftivism and guerrilla knitting share a communal nature: they create forms of collective participation, make overlooked social issues visible, and demonstrate how crafts-manship can become a political and social language in its own right.

Knitting has thus claimed a role in public life, becoming a shared, creative practice that fosters expression and community (Conti & Motta, 2024). Participatory knitting projects engage multiple hands in designing relational processes and networks that mirror a connected society (Scalera, 2015). In such projects, the process itself – rather than the final, aesthetically pleasing object – holds the deepest meaning (Conti & Motta, 2024).

These theoretical lenses allow us to understand knitting not only as a craft or symbolic practice but as a mode of inquiry, a way of engaging with and giving form to the invisible lines of social life.

Within the *Methexis* project, these reflections formed a significant point of convergence among diverse disciplinary domains – mathematical engineering, communication design, and knit and textile design – all working within the fragile and complex prison context.

From an ethical standpoint, a public space that normalizes isolation and social disintegration constitutes an institutional failure (GND, 2023). In this sense, a pressing and still unanswered question in the literature concerns how to promote, within fragile prison contexts, the engagement of inmates and prison staff in forms of social interaction and peer support (Haynie et al., 2018).

*Methexis* developed an original exploration of generative modelling, aiming to build and empirically validate a relational model-map of the Young Adult section of San Vittore prison. This model sought to represent the network of interactions among inmates, staff (officers, social and health

workers, volunteers), and external actors – the social fabric linking the institution to its broader environment.

Combining expertise in knit and communication design, the project investigated how the tangible practice of knitting – the act of *making with yarns* – could be a collective, political, and social medium for interpreting and communicating intangible data. Through this approach, knit and narrative practices became tools to transform complex data into shared, participatory, and embodied forms of understanding within the marginalized prison context.

### 3. Methexis Project: Context and Methodology

#### 3.1. Methexis

The *Methexis* project (*Mathematics, Narratives, and Generative Spaces for Highly Fragile Contexts*), funded by the Poliso-social Award 2023, was developed within the Off Campus San Vittore hub of Politecnico di Milano, as part of the university's broader social engagement program.

Involving multiple departments – Mathematics (DMAT), Design, Architecture and Urban Studies (DASU), and Electronics, Information and Bioengineering (DEIB) – the project adopted an action-research approach that combined engineering, design, and architecture. By integrating mathematical modeling and participatory narrative methods, Methexis mapped social relationships within the Young Adults Section of San Vittore Prison to foster a more dialogical and human-centered prison environment.

Dialogues between DMAT researchers and prison stakeholders provided the foundation for a study on perceived well-being. Data were collected through anonymous questionnaires completed by detainees and analyzed using complex network theory. A social network model of individuals was constructed based on similarity: the relationship between two individuals was considered stronger the more their responses aligned. This network was subsequently examined through cluster analysis, which identified groups of individuals exhibiting high internal similarity and low external similarity. Each cluster was characterized according to specific well-being parameters.

Within the broader methodological framework, the well-being study integrated quantitative and qualitative dimensions. The questionnaire was co-designed through participatory collaboration with detainees, volunteers, and prison staff to ensure contextual relevance and inclusivity. It consisted of 17 questions, organized into 12 categories, rated on a four-point scale (0-3) to capture self-perceived levels of well-being. Data collection took place between September and October 2024, involving 73 respondents, corresponding to approximately two-thirds of the young adult prison population at the time.

The project culminated in *The Five Knots of Well-being*, an installation interpreting the collected data into visual, audio and material form, integrating textile and sound-based representations as extensions of the methodological approach, to stimulate dialogue between the internal and external communities. Due to institutional restrictions related to the particular

condition of working inside a prison, the knit design activities and the final exhibition were conducted outside the prison, unlike what had been originally planned during the project's design phase. Consequently, researchers from the Design Department (*Knitdesign.polimi* and *ImagisLab* research groups), working in collaboration with DMAT, used the anonymized responses collected within the prison to create five knitted frames, each representing a specific dimension of well-being. These artefacts were exhibited at the Design Campus, allowing the research outcomes to reach a broader public while maintaining a symbolic connection with the incarcerated participants.

The exhibition, titled *The Five Knots of Well-being: Weaves and Resonances from San Vittore Prison*,<sup>1</sup> was held from 17 to 27 March 2025 at the School of Design (Politecnico di Milano). The venue was deliberately selected to engage university students, whose age group coincides with that of the young adult detainees. During the exhibition, visitors were invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire, replicating the same questions used within the prison context.

This procedure enabled the collection of comparative data from an external population, while simultaneously framing the exhi-

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1 The Five Knots of Well-being: Weaves and Resonances from San Vittore Prison was developed within the Methexis project by research groups from the Politecnico di Milano. The scientific direction was led by Francesca Piredda (ImagisLab, Laboratorio Carcere) and Giovanni Maria Conti (Knitdesign.polimi). Artistic direction was by Chiara Ligi, with Mariana Ciancia coordinating contents. Exhibition design was by Chiara Ligi, Giorgia Borroni, and Marianna Frangipane; graphic design by Giorgia Borroni. Textile design and production were curated by Giovanni Maria Conti, Martina Motta, Anna Doneda, Diego Dani, and Michele Fumagalli. Sound design was composed and edited by Max Viale. Technical support was provided by the Exhibit and Fashion Laboratories (Department of Design). Filmar supplied textile materials; printing by BSC.

bition as a methodological extension aimed at fostering critical reflection on the complexities of incarceration. As a result, this multimodal strategy, based on the integration of mathematics, knit design, and narrative methods, enabled the exploration of well-being through both quantitative indicators and symbolic, material, and sensorial dimensions in a fragile environment. The project thus helped disseminate findings beyond the prison context, fostering broader dialogue on the intersections of well-being, design, and social justice.

## 4. Results: From Data to Exhibition

### 4.1. The Five Knots of Well-being: Weaves and Resonances from San Vittore Prison

Given its focus on well-being, researchers asked themselves during the development of *Methexis: What does it mean to live in a confined space, without stimuli and without silence?* Prison is a place where every sound – keys, gates, voices – re-echoes relentlessly, while time flows differently from the outside world.

This led researchers to identify two research questions: How, then, can well-being be addressed, qualified and measured in such a unique context? And how can that same context be communicated beyond the prison walls, to raise awareness among a broader public?

From these questions emerged the design of an exhibition that interprets both qualitative and quantitative data into multisensory physical patterns and sound, thereby fostering reflection on the ethical and political dimensions of *making*.

The project was initially conceived as a participatory collective knitting activity, applying Manzini's (2015) co-design concept to involve expert designers from *Knitdesign.polimi* and non-expert participants, including detainees and prison staff.

Knots were selected as the basic unit of participation, chosen for their accessibility and their symbolic value as markers of social bonds. Knots were intended to serve as symbolic, structural, and compositional elements, forming an allegory of the relational networks that interweave inside the prison and constitute the fragile yet vital foundations of well-being.

The frames were designed as a “potential network”—a series of taut, partially overlapping threads that do not interact unless tied together. Participants were thus expected to respond to the well-being questionnaire by tying knots on the textile frames, producing a tangible visualization of the data.

However, the activity could not be carried out inside the prison due to institutional delays and security restrictions, and the installation had to be reconceptualized. Reflecting on this constraint, the research team recognized that the well-being issue is also central to Generation Z - the generation that includes both the young adult detainees and the students of the School of Design. This realization inspired an attempt to re-establish the otherwise impossible dialogue between the inside and the outside, creating a symbolic connection between two social groups that could not otherwise interact. This dialogue was mediated through the material and sound structure of the installation.

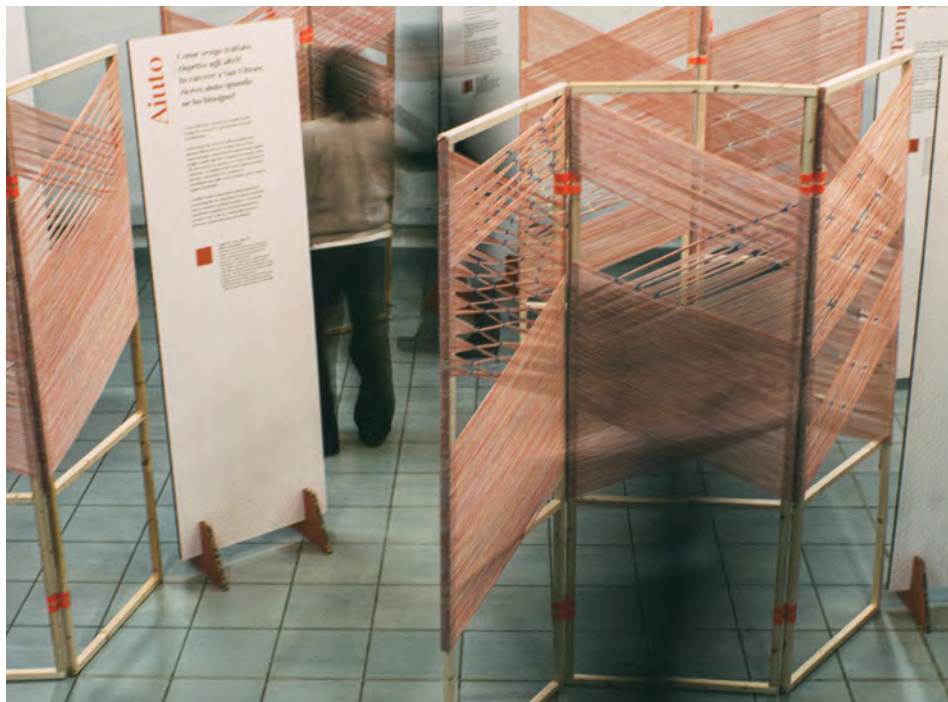
Once this direction was established:

1. The responses collected by the DMAT research group were elaborated by the Knitdesign.polimi research group (Department of Design), which produced the textile frames within the university spaces, using the same design elements and codes but without the direct involvement of the detainees.
2. The ImagisLab research group (Department of Design) developed the concept of the overall exhibition, the visual apparatus accompanying the five frames and, in collaboration with sound designer Max Viale, designed an immersive soundscape to accompany and extend the interaction with the physical installation. Through the interplay of sound and physical frames, the installation aimed to create a space for reflection, empathy, and connection with the audience (Fig. 1).

#### **4.2. The Key Dimensions of Well-being**

Building on the data collected through the well-being questionnaire, the exhibition interpreted quantitative results into material and soundscapes through five key thematic frames: time, sleep, relationships, support, and work – aspects that resonate not only within the prison but also across individuals navigating different life experiences.

Each of the five dimensions was associated with a specific color – blue, yellow, red, orange, or fuchsia – and represented on an individual frame. Each knot was manually tied by the knit design research team, following a system of data-driven visual encoding.



**Figure 1.** General view of the exhibition showing five textile frames with descriptive totems and QR codes linking to soundscapes, March 2025. (Photo: Nicola M. Patitucci).

While the five colors, in pastel tones, blend randomly in the background of each frame, the same colors, in more saturated and vibrant tones, are used to create the knots in contrast with the background, making each data point visible and legible, and emphasizing the relational and symbolic weight of each response.

The interpretation of numerical data in textile expression followed a specific logic: the number, color, and placement of the knots reflect the distribution of responses within three analytical categories derived from mathematical modeling – distress, uncertainty, and well-being.

These categories were interpreted visually as follows:

- *Distress / isolated knots*: There are a few isolated knots and sharp shapes. They gather solitary threads, generating angular geometric patterns and leaving more empty spaces.
- *Uncertainty / edge knots*: The knots are distributed along the overlapping areas, tracing precarious paths that symbolize indecision – not knowing how or how much one feels or is unwell.
- *Well-being / interconnected knots*: The knots are in the densest areas of the threads, where connections occur, the network is stronger, and each contributes to generating a stable and interconnected design.

This process exemplifies the integration of mathematics, design, and narrative as complementary methodologies: the mathematical model enabled the abstraction and quantification of social patterns; knit design translated these patterns into tactile forms; and the narrative dimension played a dual role – first, in building the trust and relational conditions necessary for participants to engage meaningfully with the questionnaire process, and later, in shaping the curatorial choices and communicative framing of the installation.

Together, these methods ensured analytical rigor while fostering embodied and emotional understanding.

A detailed breakdown of the five frames is provided below, showing how the data were visually encoded based on the number of responses within each cluster (distress, uncertainty, well-being), and how each question was translated into physical knots using different thread combinations:

Frame	Knot Color	Distress	Uncertainty	Well-being
Sleep	Blue	51 isolated knots	11 edge knots	13 interconnected knots
Work	Fuchsia	12 isolated knots	30 edge knots	33 interconnected knots
Relationships	Red	17 isolated knots	26 edge knots	33 interconnected knots
Support	Orange	17 isolated knots	34 edge knots	25 interconnected knots
Time	Yellow	33 isolated knots	30 edge knots	13 interconnected knots

Each textile frame was then paired with a unique soundscape designed to evoke emotional and cognitive reflections.

The sound design establishes a dialogue between the textile and auditory dimensions, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in the complex layers of meaning that emerge from the woven works and the detainees' responses.

It connects the physical sphere represented by the knitted frames with an intangible, three-dimensional sonic space (spatialized audio), transforming the campus environment into a site for reflection and awareness.

Each sound environment was composed to evoke sensations and associations related to its specific theme.

The use of individual headphone listening amplifies the intimacy of the experience, while situating the installation in a transitory public space encourages spontaneous encounters with the work.

Following, the reflections that each dimension brought to the project and how they were made tangible through textile and sound.

*Sleep* draws on questions about rest quality, medication use, and motivation upon waking, exposing the tensions between

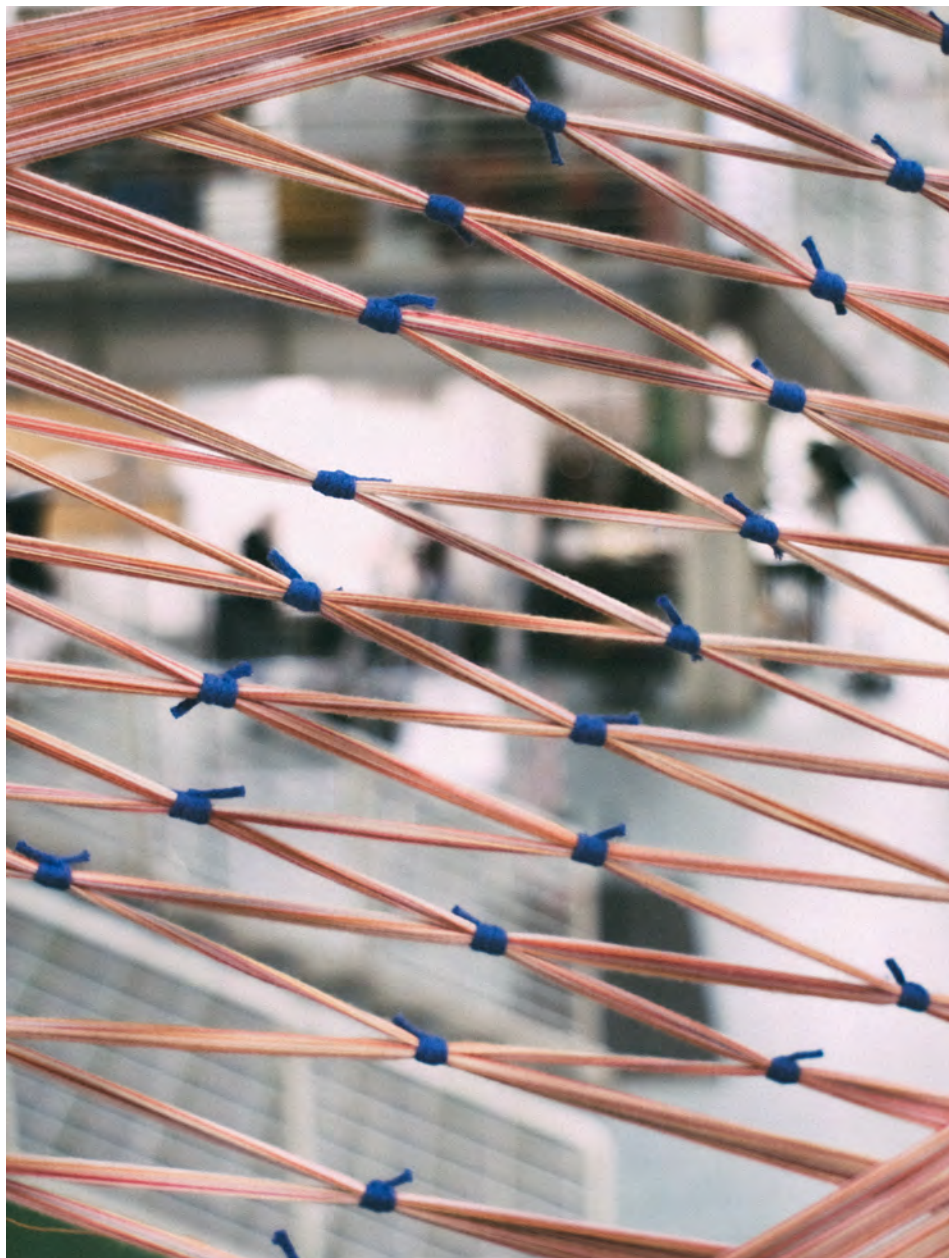
insomnia, reliance on psychotropics, and diurnal apathy; its soundscape layers gentle waves, muted frequencies, and sudden breaks to evoke the fragile boundary between sleep and wakefulness (Fig. 2).

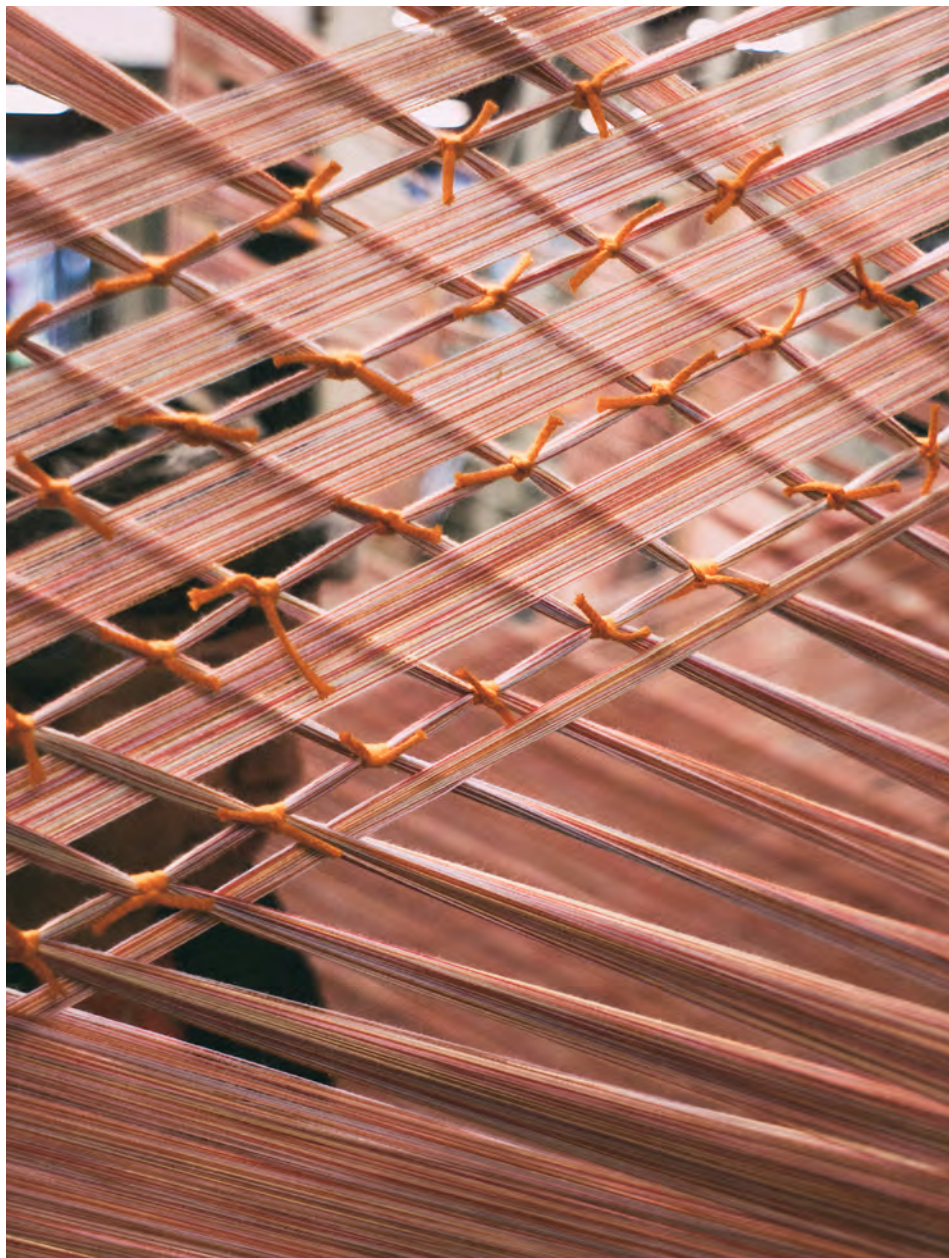
*Activities* synthesizes whether individuals participate in programs, how satisfied they feel, and whether they can access work, revealing how the absence of both labor and activities produces the lowest well-being; its soundscape shifts from mechanical rhythms to fluid textures, reflecting both alienation and the value of creative or work engagement as survival mechanisms.

*Relationships* examines the emotional climate within shared cells, where proximity can generate both support and strain; denser weaves depict stronger bonds, while the soundscape blends whispers, harmonies, dissonances, and strategic silences to render intimacy, tension, and the persistent negotiation of shared space.

*Support* interlaces perceptions of fairness with the degree of help received, identifying the most critical condition when individuals feel simultaneously unsupported and unjustly treated; this knot is accompanied by empathetic compositions that alternate between ascending hopeful tones and resonant, isolating echoes capturing the oscillation between connection and abandonment (Fig. 3).

Finally, *Time* addresses how incarcerated people perceive the passage of days in a rigid environment, translating this experience into layered weaves and circular, repetitive sound patterns that evoke the stretching, compressing, and monotony of prison time.





## 5. Discussion

The engagement of participants from San Vittore Prison was made possible through *Storylab* – the weekly collaborative storytelling workshop (Ligi & Panepinto, 2025; Chiaravalloti, 2025; Ciancia et al., 2024; Tassinari et al., 2024; Panepinto, 2024) – which fostered trust among detainees, staff, and researchers. Introducing the *Methexis* project within the Storylab sessions enabled the collection of data from young adult inmates, thanks to the pre-existing relationship of trust that facilitated moments of expression and sharing of participants' stories. In this sense, within the *Methexis* project, the act of making was conceived as an act of weaving relationships: weaving emerged as a metaphor for social interaction, connecting individuals and perspectives through shared narratives.

This symbolic and narrative act of weaving subsequently evolved into a physical practice of knitting, originally intended to be conducted inside the prison as a collective making activity.

Institutional restrictions, however, required the project to be reconfigured outside the prison. The act of knitting was therefore undertaken by researchers at *Knitdesign.polimi*, who became mediators interpreting intangible, narrative, and mathematical data into visible and tactile artefacts.

The resulting installation, *The Five Knots of Well-being*, invited the public to engage with the same questions posed to detainees, revealing their universal relevance.

Through material and soundscapes, the work activated reflection on well-being and reconnected inside and outside communities.

The textile's materiality and sound resonance acted as entry points into experiences that cannot be directly lived, fostering empathy and awareness.

In doing so, the project demonstrates that knitting can transcend its conventional meaning as a domestic or decorative practice to become a horizontal space – a tool for communication, mediation, and inclusion, aiming to escape the oppressive dynamics of contemporary society (Foucault, 1995). Building on Ingold's notion of making as a practice of correspondence – where forms emerge through continuous negotiation with materials, contexts, and constraints (Ingold, 2010; 2013) – the outcomes of *Methexis* can be understood not simply as representations of prison sociality but as active extensions of the meshwork of relations that constitute it.

By materializing social connections and translating data into shared multimodal experience, *Methexis* confirms making as a relational act, demonstrating how design can render visible and tangible the otherwise intangible dynamics of care, vulnerability, and support.

Beyond these reflections, *Methexis* project offers a methodological contribution to social design research by demonstrating how narrative, mathematical, and material practices can be interwoven into a single generative and participatory process. The integration of complex network modelling, embodied making, and multisensory interpretation constitutes an innovative approach for investigating and communicating relational phenomena in fragile contexts.

This hybrid methodology not only produces new forms of knowledge – grounded, situated, and experientially accessible – but also expands the repertoire of tools available to designers working with marginalized communities.

By showing how making can operate simultaneously as inquiry, representation, and social mediation, the project advances current debates in social design and opens pathways for future research on material practices as vehicles for collective awareness and transformation.

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**VI**

# **BIOGRAPHIES**

**Grant Baker**

His career blends creative leadership, product design, and design education. He is recognised for developing engaging design programmes, supporting emerging designers, and building meaningful global connections through his International Design Studio project. Alongside his academic work, Grant is the Design Director at Process of Making, where he creates unique, simple, and functional products for retail. His designs have been sold internationally through leading retailers such as MoMA, The Design Museum, and Selfridges, and have been featured in publications including *Wallpaper*, *Icon Magazine*, *Elle Decoration*, and *The Guardian*. His work has also been showcased at major international events such as the Milan Furniture Fair, ICFE, Maison et Objet, 100% Design, and the Gwangju Design Biennial.

[grant.baker@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:grant.baker@ntu.ac.uk)

**Merve Bektaş**

Istanbul-born Merve Bektaş is an inter- and transdisciplinary designer, artist, and researcher at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. She holds a BA in Industrial Product Design from the Marmara University Faculty of Fine Arts and an MA in Eco-Social Design from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. Merve blends participatory, practice-based, and research-through-design methodologies, engaging with critical, speculative, and more-than-human design approaches to contribute to eco-social transformations. Her research examines multispecies relationships, materiality, crafts, and technologies for circular design production processes. Her works have been exhibited at the Museum of Nature South Tyrol, the Briderhaus LU, and presented during the Bolzano Art Weeks and Long Night of Sciences. She leads the interdisciplinary project WOLB Wollelab - funded through Young Researchers – INEST at unibz.

[merve.bektas@unibz.it](mailto:merve.bektas@unibz.it)

**Nicola Besana**

Trained as Product and Digital Interaction Designer is now a PhD Candidate and teaching assistant at the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano. Collaborator of the Experience and Interaction Design research team, his research focuses on how Interaction Design – and its participatory processes – can contribute to improving the development and use of digital technologies in the public Tourism sector and how Sustainability can be integrated in Interaction Design and its Education.

[nicola.besana@polimi.it](mailto:nicola.besana@polimi.it)

**Renato Bernasconi**

Associate Instructor of the School of Design and Director of the journal *Diseña*. Bachelor of Arts, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He is interested in design methods against oppression and design for social justice, which he approaches from an anarchist perspective, that is, exploring the ways in which design methods can contribute to emancipation, dignity, autonomy, and self-realization of people. He is also interested in feminist and decolonial perspectives.

[rbernasr@uc.cl](mailto:rbernasr@uc.cl)

**Mauro Attilio Ceconello**

Architect and Professor at the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano. He focused his research activity on interaction design to enhance cultural heritage, apps for valorizing archives, museum assets and tourism through mobile technology, location-based games, and virtual and augmented reality. His teaching activity focuses on Product and Industrial Design. Head of the Design Labs System of the Design Department, he is the scientific coordinator of research projects concerning the valorization of culture through digital technologies and interaction tools.

[mauro.ceconello@polimi.it](mailto:mauro.ceconello@polimi.it)

**Bianca Chiti**

PhD candidate in Sustainability and Innovation for the Design of the Built Environment and Product Systems at the School of Architecture, University of Florence. Her research focuses on the role of craft in industrial product development in the furniture sector. She is currently working on the PhD project: "Craft Driven Innovation - The know-how at the base of industrial innovation", scholarship: "Innovative Methods of Industrialisation with Manual Techniques", co-funded by the Italian company.

[bianca.chiti@unifi.it](mailto:bianca.chiti@unifi.it)

**Mariana Ciancia**

PhD, Associate Professor at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano. She is a member of Imagis Lab research group and the Interaction and Experience Design (IEX) research group. Since the beginning, she has been part of 'Laboratorio Carcere' (DASTU and Design), conducting action research at Off Campus San Vittore. She is Director of the Specializing Master in Brand Communication (POLI.design in collaboration with UNA). Her research and teaching activities, both nationally and internationally, focus primarily on Communication Design, with a particular emphasis on design processes, tools, and the creation of narrative-based artefacts—digital, physical and hybrid—within a media ecosystem shaped by digital transformation.

[mariana.ciancia@polimi.it](mailto:mariana.ciancia@polimi.it)

**Giovanni Maria Conti**

PhD cum laude, Associate Professor, is currently the Head of the Fashion Design Program at Politecnico di Milano. Scientific Coordinator of the KnitDesign Research Group at Design Department of Politecnico di Milano, he is expert collaborator of the Istituto Italo-Latino Americano – IILA in the Pymes Forum for cooperation projects on textile and fashion. He is a member of the editorial board of "Lupetti. Editori di Comunicazione" and in 2020 he received the Honorable Mention at the XXVI Compasso d'Oro for the "DigiKnit" research. He is member of the CUID, Design National Conference and member of the Advisory Board of CiAUD, Research Center in Architecture Urbanism and Design - Lisbon School of Architecture and member of LeNS - International Learning Network on Sustainability.

[giovanni.conti@polimi.it](mailto:giovanni.conti@polimi.it)

**Ben Couture**

Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture & the Built Environment at Northumbria University. He is an active designer, researcher and maker with specialisms in spatial/furniture design, exhibition-making and modular construction. A selection of realised work is presented on [bencouture.studio](http://bencouture.studio). His work has been featured in media including the Wall Street Journal and print publications by Thames & Hudson and RIBA Publications. Ben's research interests centre around design in the built environment; covering digital & spatial exhibition environments, intersections of art & architectural space, and modular construction. An ongoing series of curator interviews and exhibition reviews are documented on website [archxclimate.com](http://archxclimate.com). Recently a series of group exhibitions and engagement projects have been set up between Northumbria schools of Architecture and Design, and cultural institution English Heritage.

[ben.couture@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ben.couture@northumbria.ac.uk)

**Luca D'Elia**

PhD, designer and Assistant Professor at the PDTA Department of Sapienza University of Rome. His research focuses on digital manufacturing and co-design practices within urban contexts and Maker communities. His expertise is grounded in an interdisciplinary action-research approach that examines the theoretical status of artifacts, emphasizing product design and the role of digital fabrication. His work explores the cultural and linguistic potential of Product Design through technological, social, economic, and ecological processes within distributed production networks. He investigates the post-industrial landscape and the emergence of digital artisans, analysing three interconnected levels related to the role of enabling technologies, community-based projects as a hybrid ensemble of producers, designers, and citizens, and the urban fabric to identify truly impactful sustainable design strategies.

[luca.delia@uniroma1.it](mailto:luca.delia@uniroma1.it)

**Marco Denni**

PhD candidate, he commenced his exploration of extended reality technologies within the VR laboratories of the institution, after taking both bachelor's and master's degrees in the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano. He was actively involved in the European research project ARTCAST 4D, conducted in collaboration with the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano, on the concept of immersion for Art and Culture. His doctoral research is dedicated to the observation and analysis of the application of immersive and advanced technologies within the artistic and cultural domain, with a focus on SAR technology for visitors' experience inside museums.

[marco.denni@polimi.it](mailto:marco.denni@polimi.it)

**John Dixon**

He is a critical yet curious designer, maker, and assistant professor of Industrial Design at the College of DAAP at the University of Cincinnati. For John, design is an avenue through which he can explore and demonstrate the value and impact that the act of designing and making can have on people, spaces, and ideas.

[dixonjb@ucmail.uc.edu](mailto:dixonjb@ucmail.uc.edu)

**Anna Doneda**

Master of Science cum laude in Design for the Fashion System from Politecnico di Milano, she worked as a knitwear product developer and is now a yarn researcher and buyer for a fashion brand in Milan. She continues to wonder which yarns are best for weaving togetherness, sociability, and community, trying to be an active citizen in the town where she has lived since she was born by organizing social moments that foster community involvement.

[anna1.doneda@polimi.it](mailto:anna1.doneda@polimi.it)

**Elena Maria Formia**

Full Professor in Design at the Department of Architecture, University of Bologna, where she is Director of First Cycle Degree in Industrial Design and the Second Cycle Degree in Advanced Design, and member of the Advanced Design research group. She is an architect and holds a PhD in History of Architecture and Urban Planning. Her research focuses on design history and culture, exploring the role of the humanities and social sciences in shaping design theory, education, and practice, investigating future-oriented approaches from a historical perspective. She is co-founder of the Latin Network of Design as a Process and Deputy Editor-in-chief and Managing Editor of the journal *Diid – Disegno Industriale* Industrial Design.

[elena.formia@unibo.it](mailto:elena.formia@unibo.it)

**Anthony Forsyth**

Assistant Professor in the School of Design, Arts and Creative Industries at Northumbria University, where he teaches on the BA Design for Industry/ Product Design courses. He holds an MFA from Konstfack, Stockholm and a PhD from Northumbria University. He has previously worked in commercial practice for a number of design consultancies on a wide range of projects for both private enterprises and public bodies. His research interests include the application of design philosophies – particularly everyday aesthetics and thing theory – to design practice. He has also led a series of collaborations with national charity, English Heritage, around the relationship between heritage, design and material culture. Past work can be viewed at [designhistories.com](http://designhistories.com). His work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Danish Design Centre and the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum, New York. A selection of work is presented at [anthonyforsyth.com](http://anthonyforsyth.com).

[anthony.forsyth@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:anthony.forsyth@northumbria.ac.uk)

**Edu Fernandes Lima Jacques Filho**

PhD in Communication Sciences at Unisinos (Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) and professor of Journalism at Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso. Post-Doctorate fellow in Design at Unisinos from 2018 to 2023. He holds a degree in Social Communication with a specialization in Journalism from the Catholic University of Pelotas (Ucpel) (2010) and a master's degree in communication sciences from Unisinos (2014). Editorial assistant of the *Strategic Design Research Journal*. His research interests include the epistemology of communication, from digital journalism to digital Humanities, Cultural Industries, online communities, open science and mediatization.

[edu.jacques@ufmt.br](mailto:edu.jacques@ufmt.br)

**Tom Hurford**

He is a senior lecturer in Product Design at Nottingham Trent University, England, where he leads the MA and MSc Product Design courses, as well as teaching on the BA, BSc and Furniture Design undergraduate programmes of study. Tom holds an MSt in the History of Design from the University of Oxford, a PGCE in Engineering from Sheffield Hallam University, a BA (Hons) in Furniture and Product Design from Nottingham Trent University, and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Supporting his teaching, Tom's recent research has been published in the IDSA's quarterly publication, *Innovation*, and included in the annual International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education. Away from academia, Tom has previously been employed as a furniture designer/ maker working on projects including bespoke

cabinetry, hotel contract furniture, and more recently architectural heritage assets that has included work for the Duke of Rutland and the Crown.

[tom.hurford@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:tom.hurford@ntu.ac.uk)

### **Chiara Ligi**

Research fellow at the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano, she is a part of Imagis Lab and Laboratorio Carcere research groups. Embracing relational and participative approaches, her research explores narrative-driven processes and co-design in marginalized contexts. At Off Campus San Vittore, inside San Vittore prison, she leads Storylab, a participatory storytelling workshop, and has contributed to action-research projects such as ReverseLab, Methexis, and Vocabolario San Vittore. She is also a creative producer and media artist dealing with audiovisual language, interactive storytelling and digital media, exploring collaborative forms of creation. With the collective Tokonoma, she realizes video installations, interactive works, and immersive exhibitions i.e. Historical voices from the Minett (FNR Award 2021 for Outstanding Promotion of Science to the Public), Remixing industrial pasts and Moving Lusitalia (included in the ADI Design Index 2023). She has been experimenting with live cinema for years with the Film-Live Association, including CenacoloLive (Da Vinci's Last Supper Museum). She is a lecturer at Civica Scuola di Cinema "Luchino Visconti" in multimedia design and interactive storytelling.

[chiara.ligi@polimi.it](mailto:chiara.ligi@polimi.it)

### **Peter Lloyd**

Full Professor of Integrated Design Methodology in the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering at the Technical University of Delft. Chair of the Design Research Society, President of the International Association for Societies of Design Research (IASDR) and Editor-in-Chief for the Journal Designing.

[P.A.Lloyd@tudelft.nl](mailto:P.A.Lloyd@tudelft.nl)

### **Piera Losciale**

PhD student in Design at the Polytechnic University of Bari (Italy). Her research interests, of a highly transdisciplinary nature, concern product design, sustainable and circular product innovation and the field of medical design for care and well-being.

[p.losciale1@phd.poliba.it](mailto:p.losciale1@phd.poliba.it)

### **Eleonora Lupo**

Associate Professor in Design at the Politecnico di Milano, with a PhD in Industrial Design and Multimedia Communication. Her main research interests concern product and process design cultures, Design for the Cultural Heritage system, and cultures of design research and scientific publishing, dealing with a pluriversal approach for decentring design knowledge and narratives. She is vice president of SID Società Italiana di Design, vice-coordinator of the PhD Program in Design at Politecnico di Milano, and a member of the Collegium of Reviewers of The Design Journal.

[eleonora.lupo@polimi.it](mailto:eleonora.lupo@polimi.it)

### **Viktor Malakuczi**

Assistant Professor at the Department of Planning, Design and Technology of Architecture, Sapienza University of Rome, where he also obtained his PhD. His research interests revolve around the integration of Design with advanced digital know-how across various sectors, from creative coding to Artificial Intelligence, from physical computing to digital fabrication, as explored in his book Computational by Design, as well as extended reality for various fields, from cultural heritage to industrial applications. He is actively involved in the international scientific community of the Design discipline, serving as associate editor for the DIID Journal, manager of major international conferences, and leading the SID working group on Enabling Technologies in manufacturing.

[viktor.malakuczi@uniroma1.it](mailto:viktor.malakuczi@uniroma1.it)

### **Martina Motta**

PhD cum laude in Design, Assistant Professor at Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano. She is a member of Knitdesign.polimi research group. She is Board Secretary of the study courses in Fashion Design and Design for the Fashion System at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. As a faculty member she teaches at the School of Design

of Politecnico di Milano and in the FIT in Milan program of the Fashion Institute of Technology (NY). Her teaching and research activity on contemporary fashion have a particular focus on knitwear and textile design: on the convergence of traditional manual techniques with advanced technologies, on the evolution of digital representation of textile products, on the enhancement of sustainable design, processes and products within this specific industrial sector.

[martina.motta@polimi.it](mailto:martina.motta@polimi.it)

### **Francesca Piredda**

PhD, Associate Professor at the Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano. She is a member of the ImagisLab research group and Laboratorio Carcere interdisciplinary research group (Design and DASTU Departments). Francesca develops action-research in Off Campus San Vittore, within the San Vittore Prison in Milan. She collaborates with DESIS Network. Being committed to the transformative power of stories, she leads projects and educational activities on communication design, audio-visual language, digital media and the narratives. Being interested in action-research and participative design approaches, she experiments with participatory video and narrative-driven processes for co-designing. In 2017, she received the XXV ADI Compasso D'Oro award. She is Director of the Specializing Master in Digital Strategy and Processes of Innovation and of the executive course in Video Identity (in collaboration with Mediaset) at POLI.design.

[francesca.piredda@polimi.it](mailto:francesca.piredda@polimi.it)

### **James Postell**

Architect, educator, and writer. In 2019, he joined the faculty in the School of Design at the Politecnico di Milano as Associate Professor of Product Design where he continues to teach and write about interdisciplinary themes shared between interior design, product design and interaction design. He is Emeritus Professor in the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning (DAAP), at the University of Cincinnati. While at the University of Cincinnati, he taught in the programs of interior design and architecture and ran a small design practice ([www.designstudio161.com](http://www.designstudio161.com)), focusing on interior and furniture projects. He is the author of *Furniture Design*, 2nd ed. and coauthor of *Materiality and Interior Construction*, both published by Wiley and Sons. His current research at the Politecnico di Milano is involved in CirCLER, a funded EU project to guide furniture companies to address problems and challenges in implementing their transition toward a more Circular Economy. His current teaching intertwines themes of sustainability, making, and materiality in product design, furniture design and interior design.

[james.postell@polimi.it](mailto:james.postell@polimi.it)

### **Jouke Verlinden**

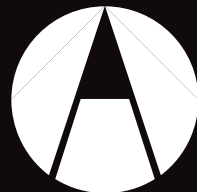
Professor at the Faculty of Design Sciences, University of Antwerp. At the Department of Product Development, he leads the Augmented Crafting Lab, focused on the intersection of digital fabrication, 3D CAD, and human-computer interaction. His research delves into how innovative design tools and methods might impact the profession of design and the creative industry.

[jouke.verlinden@uantwerpen.be](mailto:jouke.verlinden@uantwerpen.be)

### **Seçil Uğur Yavuz**

Associate Professor in the Faculty of Design and Art at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano and serves as the Study Course Director of the Master in Eco-Social Design. She earned her PhD in Design from Politecnico di Milano in 2012. Her research explores the blurred boundaries between the analog and the digital, particularly through participatory and co-design methods to imagine and prototype alternative narratives and practices that foster eco-social transformation. Her research outcomes aim to catalyze dialogues and spark new visions of socio-technological entanglements, working toward more sustainable and desirable future(s). Her teaching spans master's and PhD programs, where she focuses on research through design, eco-social design, and embodied design methods.

[secil.uguryavuz@unibz.it](mailto:secil.uguryavuz@unibz.it)



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