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Proceedings of Nordes 2025: Relational Design

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NORDES 2025

RELATIONAL DESIGN

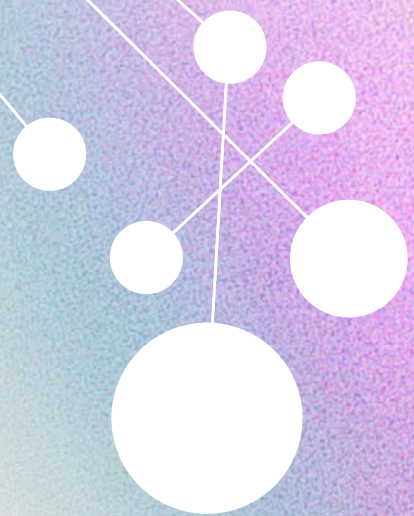
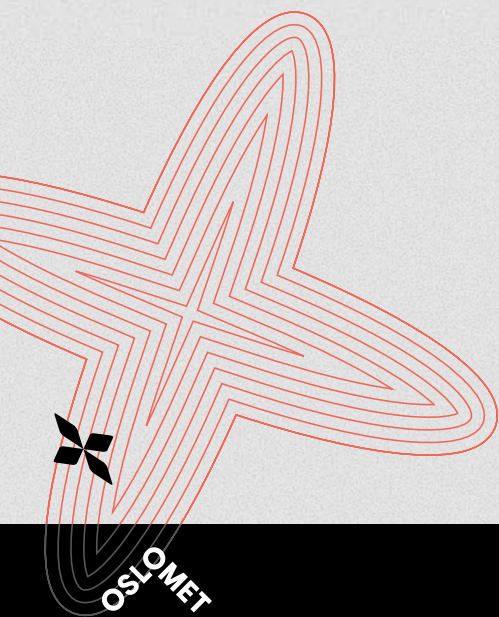
**Proceedings of the
11th Nordic Design Research Society (NORDES) Conference**
6-8th August 2025, Oslo

(Eds.).

Andrew Morrison (Oslo School of Architecture and Design, AHO)

Alma Culén (University of Oslo)

& Laurence Habib (Oslo Metropolitan University)



Proceedings of Nordes International Conference

6-8 August 2025, Oslo

Organised by the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO), University of Oslo
& Oslo Metropolitan University

Editors

(Eds.). Andrew Morrison (Oslo School of Architecture and Design, AHO)
Alma Culén (University of Oslo)
& Laurence Habib (Oslo Metropolitan University)

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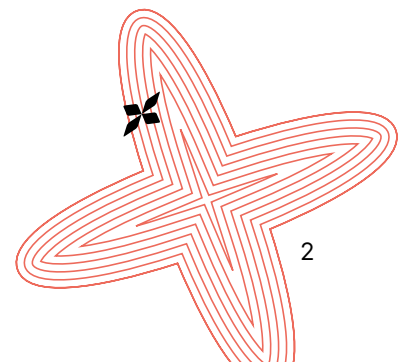
Conference Proceedings Coordination

Andrew Morrison

Conference Visual Identity

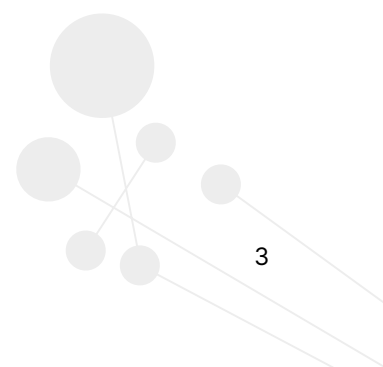
Christodoulos Christodoulou

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About NORDES

Nordes – Nordic Design Research – is a network of people interested in design research and participating in the Nordes conferences, the Nordes Summer schools or other Nordes activities. Nordes is an open network that started with the first Nordic Design Research Conference in Copenhagen 2005. In addition to organising the bi-annual Nordes conferences and Summer schools Nordes promotes the publication and dissemination of design research through the Nordes Digital Archive.

Previous Conferences

Relational Design

11th Nordic Design Research Conference 2025
6-8 August 2025, OsloMet University, Oslo, Norway

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10th Nordic Design Research Conference 2023
12-14 June 2023, Norköping, Sweden

Matters of Scale

9th Nordic Design Conference 2011
15-18 August 2021, online/ Design School Kolding
& University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

Who Cares?

8th Nordic Design Research Conference 2019
3-6 June 2019, Aalto University, Espoo, Finland

Design + Power

7th Nordic Design Research Conference 2017
15-17 June 2017, AHO, Oslo, Norway

Design Ecologies

6th Nordic Design Research Conference 2015
June 7-10, 2015, Konstfack, Stockholm,
Sweden

Experiments in Design Research

5th Nordic Design Research Conference 2013
June 9-12, 2013, KADK, Copenhagen, Denmark
& Malmö University, Sweden

Making Design Matter

4th Nordic Design Research Conference 2011
May 29-31, Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland

Engaging Artifacts

3rd Nordic Design Research Conference 2009
August 30-September 1, AHO, Oslo, Norway

Design Inquiries

2nd Nordic Design Research Conference 2007
May 27-30, Konstfack, Stockholm, Sweden

In the Making

1st Nordic Design Research Conference 2005
May 29-31, Royal Danish Academy, School of
Architecture, Copenhagen, Denmark

Access

Papers from and material about earlier NORDES conferences can be found at www.nordes.org and are also archived in the DRS Digital Library at <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/nordes/>

Welcome to NORDES 2025

The conference theme of relational design invites us to see design not as an intervention but as participation—an ongoing act of attunement to others, to places, to histories, and to futures not yet formed. It begins not with things but with connections: between people, contexts, ecosystems, technologies, and values. It resists the notion of isolated objects and questions the assumption that complex problems can be clearly delimited and definitely ‘resolved’. Instead, relational design traces patterns of interdependence and co-creation, where listening, sensing and dialogue are not just a prelude to making, but an inherent component of the design process.

In relational approaches, the emphasis shifts from a specific design to ongoing exchange, from fixed goals to evolving commitments. Relational design values ambiguity, mutuality, plurality, and care, embracing the productive tensions that arise when many voices meet. From a relational point of view, design is not a solitary pursuit but a collective choreography shaped by context and carried forward by relationships; it asks us to cultivate and nurture connections that matter.

In this spirit, NORDES 2025 aims to provide such a ‘relational’ space—a gathering shaped by the interactions of its community. The conference reflects the breadth and depth of research being conducted across design practices and disciplines, as well as the profound interest in the role of the relational and what it might contribute to design.

All contributions underwent thorough review processes to ensure their relevance, clarity, and potential to support and provoke further dialogue. Full papers, exploratory papers, workshops, and exhibits were subject to rigorous double-anonymous peer review. Submissions to the Doctoral Consortium were carefully considered by a committed review team of programme committee members, supporting an extended process of reflection and development for early-stage researchers.

The Conference Programme includes accepted work and features some novelties we hope participants will like: rather than opening with a single keynote, we have three shorter, pointed and regional ones that offer the opportunity to think with multiple perspectives on relationality. Moreover, we have envisioned a session where audience participation is needed. Alongside the written contributions, a collection of six exhibits offers alternative modes of expression and reflection designed to foster genuine dialogue.

A conference, at its heart, is a collective act of care and commitment. It is the result of countless hours of inquiry, making, questioning, and revising. Behind each submission lies a process of dedication—conceptual, methodological, and emotional. Organising such a space is itself a form of design: an effort to hold open a temporary commons for exchange, celebration, and critique.

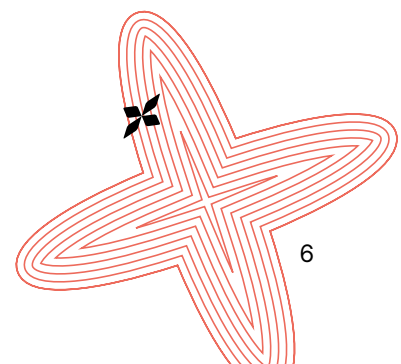
We received a total of 256 submissions. Of 105 full paper submissions, 41 were accepted and are a part of the program. Of 61 exploratory paper submissions, 25 were accepted. From 40 workshop submissions, 12 were accepted. From the pool of 36 Doctoral Consortium proposals, we accepted 22. Finally, all exhibit submissions were accepted as each was interesting in its way and had the potential to promote dialogue.

These Proceedings are part of NORDES' ecology of conferences that commenced in 2005. This is our 11th iteration and one that offers a breadth and depth of colleagues' work from the region and internationally. We encourage readers to also look to previous events and publications.

This 2025 gathering has been made possible through the engagement of four institutions in Oslo engaged in design inquiry: The School of Architecture and Design, University of Oslo, Oslo Metropolitan University, and Kristiania University College. We greatly appreciate the generosity and labour of reviewers, committees, organisers, exhibitors, volunteers, track chairs, and the support of our host, Oslo Metropolitan University.

Welcome!

Andrew Morrison, Alma Culén and Laurence Habib
Conference Co-Chairs



Original Call NORDES 2025

NORDES 2025 marks the 11th bi-annual conference in this series. Launched in 2005, the Nordic Design Research Conferences have been shaped and sustained through commitment and participation from a range of Nordic design research institutions, together with regional and international participants.

NORDES 2025 symbolises a collective arrival for this community at the completion of the first quarter of the 21st century. The event offers a range of shared spaces and formats for reconsidering what we intended and may have achieved so far in design inquiry.

However, at this juncture, this occasion also invites us to reconsider designing and related practices, pedagogies and research as we look towards the mid-21st century. We do so in the contexts of pervasive, difficult and emergent challenges, compound crises, and deepening complexities and uncertainties about how to achieve and secure substantive and durative transformation in a world undergoing rapid ecological and systemic demands and changes.

Theme

NORDES 2025 takes up the open theme Relational Design to offer perspectives and means through which we may together investigate and discuss complex dilemmas and current responses, along with design's futures and futures designing.

Relational Design gives attention to ontological multiplicity in evolving processes of becoming and emergence. It accentuates working with possibilities, tensions, paradoxes and contradictions in re-framing and shaping resonances, alliances, linkages and networks of making and researching.

Working within and across difference, Relational Design instantiates interrelations, intersections and distinctions. It facilitates non-normative, situated knowledge experimentation and its generative practices. Relational designing treasures linked, participative and dynamic agency to bring forward pragmatically viable, equitable and bearable transformative potentials and their resonant effects.

Designing and researching relationally asks us to consider the shaping of re-directive design as well as analytical and methodological frames and practices linked with values, ethics, concepts and methods centred on repair, regeneration and reinvigoration.

This includes how agency be realised when embedded within alliances, networks and webs of relationships to cultivate incipient ventures and bolder analyses in articulating relational design activities and pluralist design research formations.

Overall, rethinking and re-making design relationally invites engagement in working with entanglements – of places, zones, values, processes and participation – that are enmeshed in living and regenerative situations, environments, systems and situated acts of worldmaking.

The following are open prompts for consideration:

How might we re-think and re-work design researching in a way that remains rich and responsible in its situated, exploratory and critical practices while charting pathways and networks, alliances and diversity which contribute to wider structural, systemic and ecological transformation towards sustainable tomorrows?

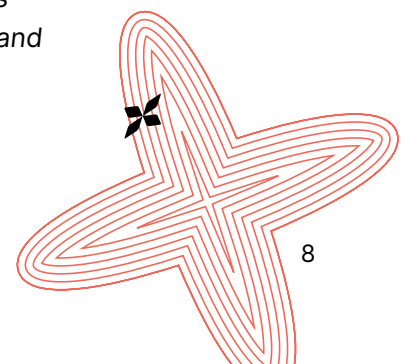
What are the pragmatic, political and creative-critical characteristics of a linked, re-positioned design inquiry that reaches beyond the logics of immediate market gain and commercial extractivist exploitation and their continuing ecological destruction?

How might we elicit diverse potentials and possibilities for realising plural, mutual, malleable and participative change in which human and nonhuman entities and ecologies are interwoven and interspersed, reflexively, recursively and regeneratively?

What design tools and techniques might be applied to work with temporal and spatial intersections and relations that support shaping creative, multimodal and transductive design literacies in order to steward practices, ethics and cultures of care and environmental justice for near and farflung regenerative futures?

In what ways might we rethink and decolonise roles and relations, activities and responses in shaping counter-narratives and collaborative storying in design inquiries that are infused with context-rich alternatives, plural perspectives and multiple mediational formats?

What non-essentialist, transdisciplinary design-thick intersectional critiques of circular thinking and economic models might inform socially, technically and ecologically responsible and vibrant sustainable change?



Types of Contributions

Submissions

NORDES conferences accept full submissions not only abstracts. A range of well-rehearsed submission formats provides both formal analytical frames yet allows for designerly articulations suited to shaping and querying relational designing practices and their research approaches and modes of publication.

NORDES 2025 invites the following contributions by type:

Full Papers, Exploratory Papers, Workshops, Exhibition, Doctoral Consortium.

All submissions are subject to a pre-review process carried out by the conference chairs and submission category coordinators to ensure coherence and quality. Full and exploratory papers, workshop and exhibition proposals will be subject to double-anonymous peer reviews. One set of full reviews per submission is provided with notifications and guidelines for preparing revised manuscripts for final digital publication. The Template for all submission types is provided in the NORDES 2025 website and also on www.nordes.org

Full papers

Co-chairs

Heather Wiltse, Einar Sneve Martinussen, Nenad Pavel, Vibeke Sjøvoll, Ramia Mazé, Minna Pikkarainen, Adeline Hvidsten.

Details

This submission category invites original and mature research and results positioned in relation to existing research literature. Full papers represent the current frontier of knowledge in the design field. Full papers may take the shape of a range of formats and rhetorical styles depending on the nature and character of material presented. In this type of contribution to NORDES, we ask that authors pay especially close attention to the conference theme and to ways design inquiry may address and develop it – academically, pragmatically and professionally – through creative and critical engagement.

Full Papers are limited to maximum of 10 pages (excluding abstract and references). Please limit the file size to 5 MB or less, use the relevant NORDES template and follow its guidelines for preparing your submission. Submit papers at the latest 14 February 2025 21 February 2025.

For further inquiries on this submission category please contact the Co-chairs. When accepted for review each submission will receive a minimum of two peer-reviews addressing strengths, weaknesses, originality, and significance of the submission. If the submission is accepted for publication, authors are expected to adopt suggested improvements as noted by reviewers and the conference programme committee. A final submission must be fully language edited.

Evaluation

Full papers will be reviewed based on:

Curiosity and expansion: The conference aims to invite curiosity and expansiveness in interpreting its theme. Authors should explain their interpretation of the theme clearly to enable reviewers to make sense of the contribution for the design research community.

Originality and articulation: Originality refers to ways the output introduces a new way of thinking about a subject, is distinctive or transformative compared with previous work in the design field. Articulation concerns ways the purpose of the work is clearly conveyed as design research. It includes how the inquiry is positioned theoretically, and how appropriate methodologies, methods and techniques have been selected, applied and re-considered. Important too is reflection on how processes and documentation are presented to show that the purpose has been achieved.

Clarity and communication: A paper needs to be clear in its focus, argumentation and supporting research and situated practices. Communication is understood as the ability to convey the focus in choice of research problematics and questions, selections of format and genre, and uses of relevant text, visuals and other means. A paper needs to be readable and fully language edited.

Exploratory papers

Co-chairs

Enrique Encinas, Joanna Boehnert, Astrid Marie Heimer, Henry Mainsah, Laura Popplow, Nicolas Torretta.

Details

The exploratory papers category functions as a channel through which emergent research topics and approaches may be investigated before becoming acknowledged or established in the broader design research community.

Here we invite submissions in forms such as, but not limited to, design cases, design fictions, design critiques, pictorials, annotated portfolios, as well as more traditional short papers. Whether text-driven or visual, submissions will differ in format because each seeks the most effective way of presenting an intended contribution to the theme and research community. A submission needs to connect its purpose, argument, claims and design work, together with the mode of inquiry selected.

While exploratory, this is still a research paper category. Submissions must refer closely to the conference theme and include a clearly communicated topic, questions and supporting design-based research linked to clear methods, hopefully, with strong foundation in empirical data. We encourage authors to investigate existing and novel concepts in the search for new theoretical openings, possibly drawing new linkages between nearby disciplines.

We ask authors to use the NORDES template as a basis, and we strongly recommend exploratory papers to be no longer than 3000 words (excluding abstract and references) with a maximum file size of 5 MB. Submit papers at the latest 14 February 2025 21 February 2025. For specific inquiries on this submission category please contact the Co-chairs.

Evaluation

Submissions will be reviewed with respect to novelty and quality of the research contribution, the consistency, clarity and effectiveness of the presentation, and the contribution paper's relevance for the conference theme.

Accepted papers will be published in the digital archive. As part of building the NORDES research community and the formats of exploratory papers, we may ask scholars who submit papers to also review others' work.

Workshops

Co-chairs

Angeliki Dimaki-Adolfson, Mari Suoheimo, Signe Louise Yndigegn, Danielle Wilde.

Details

Workshops will run for a maximum of 3 hours. Workshop proposals need 2 components: a Workshop Description and a Practical Overview. The Workshop Description frames the direction of the exploration, its significance and relevance, as well as the research basis for the workshop. The Workshop Description will be included in the Nordes 2025 Proceedings as a peer-reviewed publication. Following the related NORDES paper template, a Workshop Written Description must be a maximum of 3 pages (excluding abstract and references) and not exceed 5 MB.

The Practical Overview is submitted in addition to the Workshop Description. This provides a summary of the practicalities for running the workshop. Please include in the overview the workshop title; motivation; length of the workshop; a tentative programme; a minimum and maximum number of participants; anything participants need to bring; preferred set-up (including space, equipment, supplies, etc.); support needed (technology, materials or other assistance). Please note how you will deal with any related ethical issues, consent and data privacy. The submission will also be evaluated as to whether it can be achieved practically, so this element of the submission needs to be carefully prepared. Submit papers at the latest 28 February 2025.

Evaluation

Workshop proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Experimental nature: Exploration of a novel and compelling aspect of design research and/or practice that challenges the current boundaries of the field and reveal ways of knowing and becoming that emerge or are otherwise overlooked.

Clear planning: The goals, structure and plan for the workshop are clearly presented with explicitly stated expectations regarding resourcing and realistic support needs.

Research basis: Evidence of scholarly positioning in a relevant area of design research; connections drawn between practical explorations in the workshop and theoretical concepts and implications.

Exhibition**Co-chairs**

Nicholas Stevens, Arild Berg, Synne Skjulstad, Einar Stoltenberg, Joshi Suhas.

Details

We welcome the submission of artifacts of various types (physical, digital, proessional, performances, posters etc) that must be accompanied by an explanatory and notational and analytical research framed text (maximum 3000 words excluding abstract and references). All contributions to this category of Design Research Exhibitions must be fully formed, whether conceptual or completed. All costs for shipping and main materials are to be covered by contributors. Curating will be selective and devised by a dynamic on-site team.

Evaluation

This contribution type will be included in the Proceedings and must provide a research context, related literatures and works, clear link to the conference theme, and an analysis and reflection on what 'exhibition' does and means in conducting and communicating design inquiry. Submit papers at the latest 28 February 2025.

Doctoral Consortium**Co-chairs**

Josina Vink, Martina Čaić, Sisse Finken, Maria Göransdotter, Julia Jacoby, Satu Miettinen.

Details

Doctoral researchers are encouraged to submit work for consideration in any of the main conference types, including this one. Submissions in categories other than the Doctoral Consortium need to be fully prepared with supervisors and co-authors for anonymous submission to anonymous research review at an international level.

In contrast, the NORDES Doctoral Consortium (DC) offers PhD students a full-day, on-site and dedicated space for sharing and discussing design research work-in-progress and for learning and engaging fellow students and established researchers.

The DC is a venue that works with specific doctoral research projects and positions them in the wider regional and international contexts of design research. The DC supports the generative character of doctoral research and contributes to shaping topics, themes, perspectives, content and methods, along with building networks between students and with larger research projects and institution. The DC also functions as an arena for rehearsal and preparation of material for research publication. Supervisors are welcome to attend.

Submission

To participate, you are invited to submit a short position paper relating your PhD research. The position paper should be no more than 500 words, include design work, be no more than 5MB in size, and contain the following elements:

- A summary of your PhD project
- A discussion of how it relates to, or how you would like it to relate to, the NORDES design research community
- A description of short-term and long-term plans for the continuation of your PhD project.

Here are some tips for writing your position paper:

- Refer to the general Call for Contributions
- Think of the initial submission as the start of a conversation with peers from the design research community
- Engage your supervisor/s in thinking about what you want to get out of the Doctoral Consortium and how you could shape your initial submission
- Be sure to fully edit your submission
- Follow up the revision of your paper with your peers and supervisor/s.

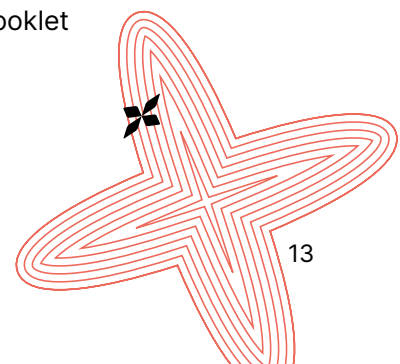
Submit papers at the latest 28 February 2025.

Evaluation

Position papers will be reviewed by the co-chairs of the Doctoral Consortium. We will review your submission for suitability to the NORDES design research community and the conference theme.

Following presentations, feedback and reviews will be given by fellow students, attending supervisors and senior design researchers. Revised papers are to be submitted to the co-chairs one month after the event (by Monday 15 September 2025).

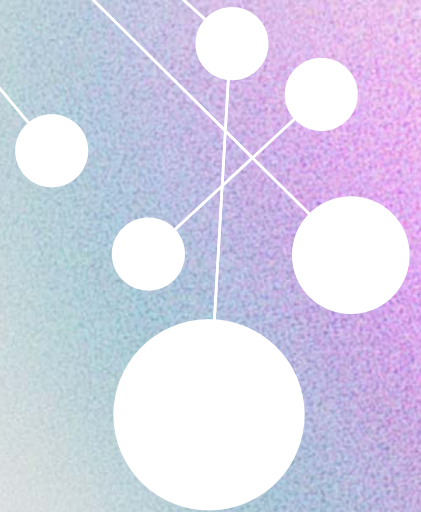
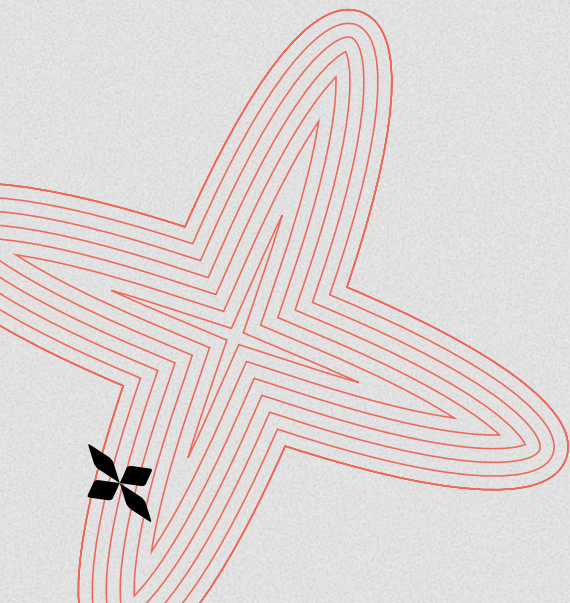
Preparing, presenting and revising your contribution qualifies for 3 ECTS credits. Final revised position papers will be compiled in a NORDES Doctoral Consortium 2025 booklet (but will not be included in the Conference Proceedings) to be circulated in autumn 2025.



NORDIS 2025

RELATIONAL DESIGN

Full Papers



PARTICIPATORY STORYTELLING AS A RELATIONAL DESIGN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF THE SAN VITTORE PRISON

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how participatory storytelling functions as a relational design practice within the constraints of a total institution, specifically in the context of San Vittore prison in Milan, Italy.

Drawing on two years of fieldwork, we analyze the power dynamics, relational infrastructures, and narrative agency that emerge through Storylab, a participatory storytelling workshop conducted inside the prison. As the workshop cultivates storytelling within a complex relational landscape, we investigate how narratives shape this relational landscape and its inherent power dynamics. We examine the ethical challenges of navigating power asymmetries in total institutions and argue for design research that is situated, responsive, and non-extractive. Our research investigates the potential of participatory storytelling to create lasting narrative infrastructure aimed at community building and developing counter-narratives within constrained institutional settings.

INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on Storylab, a participatory storytelling workshop held inside San Vittore prison in Milan. Beginning with an analysis of the relationships and power dynamics within this setting, we will address,

in particular, the processes involved in the relational aspect of participatory practice. In this case, we will ask how these processes must adapt and have been adapted to respond to the stresses of the relational context of the prison, with a focus on the use of storytelling as a tool for shaping community and developing empowering counter-narratives within a total institution (Goffman, 1961). The work discussed is rooted in almost two years of research experience, which is still ongoing. The setting for this research is a quite peculiar one, as interests a space at the margins (hooks, 1984) and a community where individuals are subjected to biopolitical power (Foucault, 1990; 1995) and therefore stripped of their agency.

Storylab is not a fixed program, but a situated (Haraway, 1988) and evolving practice shaped by the relational dynamics within the prison. As it is intrinsic in the participatory ethos of the workshop, the processes that take the stage in Storylab are molded through the participation and reception of the participants. In trying to understand how storytelling can be enacted in a setting where identities are structurally constrained, we investigate how narrative practices entangle power, agency, and social relationships in the prison context. In our work, we recognize the importance of relationships within the prison context or, more generally, in the context of the margins. These relationships are foundational to the community, creating a supportive network among the individuals who are part of it, a network that can produce strong, long-lived counter-narratives. With this paper, we are trying to tackle these questions:

In what ways can participatory storytelling function as a relational design practice within the constraints of a total institution? How might design research ethically navigate power asymmetries in total institutions such as prisons and engage with these power asymmetries while remaining ethically non-extractive and responsive? How does a participatory storytelling practice



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encourage the emergence of lasting relational infrastructures?

The goal is to create a sustainable infrastructure for narrative agency that can persist beyond the duration of Storylab itself.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Within what is called *Off Campus* initiative, the Politecnico di Milano University opened four spaces in peripheral and marginalized areas of the city of Milan, to conduct research and offer services to communities in those areas. In this sense, opening *Off Campus San Vittore* (see Figure 1) positions the prison as a marginal neighborhood of the city, mirroring suburban dynamics. The space has been active since October 2022 and has hosted the in-field activities of different research groups from the university. Among these, *Imagis Lab* is a research group within the Department of Design at Politecnico di Milano that explores the potential of narrative practices as catalysts for engagement and transformation. Its work focuses on communication design as a relational process, investigating storytelling as a situated co-design practice, particularly in marginal contexts. Through this lens, the group develops and tests methods that support the emergence of counter-narratives and collective meaning-making processes, with the aim of fostering forms of social innovation and change. *Imagis Lab* joined researchers of the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies in *Laboratorio Carcere*, an interdisciplinary research-action group built on prior engagements within Milanese penitentiary facilities, most notably the project *ACTS – A Chance Through Sports* (Polisocial Award 2019), which was carried out at the Seconda Casa di Reclusione di Milano-Bollate. These experiences laid the groundwork for a sustained presence of Politecnico di Milano in carceral contexts, leading to the opening of *Off Campus* in San Vittore prison.



Figure 1: Off Campus San Vittore with an exhibition of artifacts realized within Storylab. Ph. Imagis Lab

In this paper, we focus on *Storylab*, an ongoing participatory storytelling workshop that Imagis Lab researchers held in the Young Adults section of San Vittore prison since May 2023. The observation phase of the research within the section, which houses detainees aged 18 to 25, highlighted complex challenges—social, cultural, economic, and health-related—that call for actions fostering integration and relationship-building among detainees and between detainees and the institution. Thus, the goal of Storylab is, through the generation of processes of identification, reappropriation, reframing, and transformation through storytelling (Ciancia et al. 2014; Riedy, 2020), to push young adult inmates to develop narratives according to their own experiences and from their own perspectives.

From a theoretical standpoint, Storylab aligns with traditions in narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1991), in which personal stories are understood not only as expressions of individual identity but as relational and political acts embedded in broader social discourses. The workshop is designed to support different levels of narrative literacy—spoken, visual, and written—while foregrounding agency through the co-creation of narrative artifacts. The process embraces both autobiographical and fictional storytelling, recognizing narrative not only as a means of representation but also as a method of inquiry and transformation (Hartman 2008; Freire, 1970/2017).

Activities consist of weekly storytelling sessions, each involving around 12/15 participants, that produce narrative and artistic outputs. These sessions enable all actors to interpret, participate, and contribute actively to narrative creation, thereby promoting the emergence of shared imaginaries. Storylab serves a dual purpose: to enhance understanding of the prison's internal dynamics and to improve external communication about the often overlooked realities of incarceration.

The workshop methodology builds upon a three-step narrative-based framework previously developed and tested in other research experiences (Ciancia et al., 2015; Ciancia & Piredda, 2022; Venditti, 2017), structured as follows:

1. Collecting fragments: participants are invited to choose images representing actions, places, characters, emotions, etc.
2. Crafting stories: participants narrate mostly biographical issues elicited by the fragments selected and boosted by the researcher's proposal of questions/prompts.
3. Reframing fragments: participants create contents, narrative output and artifacts, that the researchers further elaborate into outputs of various kinds (multimedia, exhibitions, etc) with the intention of both giving back to the

participants as well as communicating the collected stories to the outside world.

This framework was further refined and tested during a project conducted at the Bollate prison (Ciancia & Piredda, 2024; Piredda et al., 2023), where it was accompanied by a dedicated toolkit consisting of images and prompts designed to support narrative construction and world-building within the prison. For its implementation in the San Vittore context, the toolkit has been adapted to reflect the specific relational and linguistic dynamics of the young adult ward and is responsive, remaining open to continuous revision; suggestions from participants are regularly incorporated to expand and diversify both the image selection and the textual prompting. The situated toolkit includes visual representations of actions, places, and emotions that serve as catalysts for storytelling, activating memory, imagination, and sensory association (see Figure 2). Accompanying prompts are thematically organized around key domains of self-narrative construction—*who I am, my story, my relationships, my places, my past, my present, my values, and my desires*.



Figure 2: The situated toolkit, as it was developed in 2023. The picture shows cards of images and cards of textual prompts. Ph. Matteo Bergamini, Lab Immagine, Politecnico di Milano.

While the original framework has served as a starting point and general structure for the research and activities within the workshop, it has been subject to change and revisions as Storylab is exploratory: it evolves in response to power structures, relational dynamics, and participant needs, as we navigate a complex and ever-changing relational landscape.

Since its inception in May 2023, *Storylab* has hosted over 100 sessions, with attendance ranging from 10 to 15 individuals each. Every session is designed to be self-contained, introducing new narrative stimuli through the toolkit of images and prompts. Each Storylab session begins around the large table in the

prison library, where participants are invited to select one or more images from the toolkit. This collective ritual initiates the narrative process, as participants articulate personal memories, thoughts, or associations triggered by the chosen images. Designers-researchers then support the unfolding of each story using thematic textual prompts, tailored to facilitate narrative development. In this setting, some participants take on the role of peer supporters or informal translators, enabling mutual aid, linguistic mediation, and the integration of thematic suggestions and feedback directly emerging from within the group.

Through practice, we tested the toolkit for different uses and activities, and we noticed that it is very adaptive. Activities have generated a variety of tangible outputs, including handmade booklets and visual storyboards. The artifacts, some of which were exhibited publicly in 2024 in two exhibitions opened to external visitors, serve as personal expressions and collective interventions, challenging dominant narratives about incarceration. This process is implemented within the limits imposed by law and regulations in terms of privacy and the willingness to respect and protect the participants.

The ongoing, open structure of the workshop enables continuous adaptation to the fluctuating prison population and ensures accessibility across linguistic and cultural differences. As part of Off Campus San Vittore's activities, Storylab benefits from the framework agreement between San Vittore Prison and Politecnico di Milano, so it has no temporal limitation. Continuity also represents a deliberate choice: it is a key condition that enables ongoing exchange, informing the research process and fostering a rooted presence within both the institution and the specific prison ward—something that would not be possible within the confines of a time-limited intervention.

Considering this assumption and, more generally, the variable nature of the context, it is natural to expect that the mode of conducting the workshop would not be constant and equal to itself over time. However, the need to alter established workshop modalities also stems from a relational sensitivity (Akama and Light, 2018; Gottlieb, 2024), which we, as designers, researchers, and in general participatory design practitioners, need. This sensitivity is a necessary part of participatory practice, as it allows one to grasp and respond to contextual dynamics and needs, which are often variable and in flux, making situated judgments (Gottlieb, 2024). To respond to this need, the processes and storytelling formats and outputs (for example booklets and visual storyboards; cardboard story-boxes and crafts; cutouts; etc.) varied throughout the workshop. Furthermore, as Storylab is born within a research context, some activities are introduced as exploratory devices to investigate the reality of prison and the applications of design practices within this reality. The

throughline in these choices is that they respect the participatory ethos of the workshop, *imposed or extractive*.

STATE OF THE ART

Thorpe & Gamman (2011) advance an understanding of the designer's role in contexts of social change that rejects a paternalistic responsibility, favouring a maternalistic or fraternalistic responsibility. This responsibility is an asset-based approach to design, in which the "good enough designer" (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011) works with social actors to leverage the community's assets to effect positive change. The research conducted at the Design Against Crime Research Centre (DACR) at the University of the Arts London showcases how design interventions can contribute to the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, focusing on responsive design methodologies that actively involve incarcerated individuals in the creation of tools and systems aimed at harm reduction and social re-entry (Gamman & Thorpe, 2006).

The condition of detention has a traumatic impact on the detained person's identity and consequently on his or her ability to form bonds (Gamman & Thorpe, 2015). Knutz et al.'s (2020) work on family narratives suggests the importance of narrative in identity construction. Although this particular research instance pertains to the identity making of the children of incarcerated individuals, it has been argued that the creation and sharing of stories within prison contexts is also beneficial to the incarcerated individual both on a personal level, in the construction and re-construction of identity, and on an interpersonal level, in the creation of relationships and cultivation of empathy (Bove & Tryon, 2018; Tyrone et al., 2022). Narrative criminology similarly emphasizes the role of personal storytelling in renegotiating self-identity (Fleetwood, 2016; Presser, 2008). This re-negotiation through stories challenges dominant societal narratives as stories take place in the constraints of discourse while simultaneously shaping it (Riedy, 2020). Storytelling with regard for incarcerated identities challenges the "Social Death" of these identities, developing counter-narratives around imprisonment and bridging the gap between detained individuals and the outer community, as exemplified by Martinovic et al. (2022) with the Humans of Saint Quentin platform, which collects real stories shared by incarcerated people.

PARTICIPATORY STORYTELLING AS RELATIONAL DESIGN PRACTICE

As posed by Udoewa and Gress (2023), Relational Design "can mean designing in, with, or for relationships". Storylab unfolds along all three of these directions as the prison setting and the relationships that form therein aren't just the background of the

participatory practice, but they inform and shape the workshop itself. The act of telling a story is in and of itself a relational practice, in that it creates a bridge between a storyteller and a listener. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958) posits identity as a relational matter: as it is revealed through speech and action, identity unfolds in the space where the individual is with others, the in-between (Tassinari & Staszowski, 2020) where storytelling takes place. In this sense, Storylab creates an interconnected network of narrative identities, made of individuals who (almost always) already know each other, but in the context of the workshop, establish a new relationship based on the act of storytelling.

This network possesses the distinctive and indispensable characteristic of being situated, specifically, in a prison. This situatedness determines the emergence of relational dynamics, often power dynamics, that strongly influence the mode and tone of storytelling. These relationships often tell a story in their own right, interweaving personal experience with context, past with present. Narrative work allows for purposeful intervention in the construction of these relationships.

While we refer to Storylab as a situated, community-based Participatory Design practice, it is fundamental to stress that this community is formed forcibly in what Goffman (1961) defines as a total institution. Total institutions tend to separate individuals from the general society physically and socially. Individuals constrained in total institutions, such as inmates in prison, are physically bound as bodies, both as they are restricted within the institution itself and as they're stripped of and subjected to biopolitical power (Foucault, 1990; 1995), losing agency over their bodies and actions. Socially, they are severed from the urban and social fabric as their relationships with the outside world become regulated by the institution (Goffman, 1961).

Storytelling supports the cultivation of "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1970/2017), offering a way to explore identity, relationships, and power dynamics. It equips individuals with the knowledge to challenge and reshape reality, as *pouvoir* (power) and *savoir* (knowledge) are inherently linked (Foucault, 1990). In this regard, narrative, by its very nature, establishes a dialectic between past actions and present identity, opening the space for reflection, agency, and the creation of a new identity. In the field of narrative criminology, this relationship between narrative and agency is particularly important for exploring the space between social limitations, real and perceived, and the tendency to offend (Fleetwood, 2016). Critical Fabulation (Hartman, 2008), that is, the practice of reconstructing narratives beyond strict historical facts, serves as a powerful tool to create counter-narratives that restore the voices of the oppressed (Freire, 1970/2017).

Operating a participatory storytelling workshop within this framework entails engaging with complex dynamics that require, as all participatory design practices do, a “relational sensitivity” (Akama & Light, 2018). In this view, the concept of embodied awareness (Gottlieb, 2024) is fundamental both in designers-researchers and in participants in the workshop. Designers-researchers must possess embodied awareness to be receptive to the relationships that are created within the institution, both among the various people who work within it (including themselves) and the dynamics between the institution and society, responding to the changes and stresses that arise from these relationships. For participants, embodied awareness is a means of recognizing and expressing authentic needs and interests, which practitioners must respond to.

ACTORS, RELATIONS, AND POWER DYNAMICS

The individuals that make up the prison population are grouped *en masse*, in a manifold body (Foucault, 1990). This clustering has among its most practical consequences: the manifold group can be supervised or rather surveilled by a smaller group of guards (Goffman 1961). This divide between “large managed group” and “small supervisory group” is largely marked by a reciprocal distrust, if not outright hostility (Goffman 1961). In the Italian carceral setting, the supervisory group is composed of correctional officers and a specific body of law enforcement. Goffman (1961) defines five different categories of total institutions. While prison is grouped with total institutions to protect the community from intentionally dangerous individuals, army barracks are considered total institutions to pursue work-like tasks. It has to be noted that in the Italian system, bodies of police enforcement (*Forze di Polizia Italiane*) are technically not part of the army (*Esercito Italiano*), but for this paper, they can be considered analogous. Therefore, both groups, managed and supervisory, are formed in total institutions, both as a byproduct of the same “carceral system” of the “disciplinary societies” (Foucault 1995): the divide of dehumanized oppressors-oppressed (Freire, 1970/2017) is produced by the exact societal mechanisms.

The antagonistic pairing of “guards-inmates” is arguably the most topical carceral context, but it is not the only power dynamic that comes into play. Other actors (healthcare and education professionals, volunteers *et similia*) are prominent in building an intricate web of relations and power dynamics. The following overview of this web of relations comes from our experience and direct observation in the San Vittore prison, but it could be generalized and applied to the Italian prison system. The complex system of actors or stakeholders includes: the detained population; Correctional Officers, who are tasked with maintaining order, discipline, and safety; educational services operators who work primarily on education and

rehabilitation; healthcare professionals; external stakeholders (e.g. volunteers), often working with associations or NGOs that provide different kinds of support to the detained population and the administration; direction of the prison, which holds high roles of responsibility and manages and coordinates it;

Power at San Vittore is distributed across formal and informal structures, reflecting both hierarchical authority and networked influence (Ligi, forthcoming). The three most evident are hierarchical power, informal influence, and informal inmates' hierarchies. In Italy, carceral institutions are deeply rooted in *hierarchical power*: the director holds the overarching authority, and delegates operational control to the Commander of the Penitentiary Police, while collaborating with departmental heads. Secondly, stakeholders such as educators, external collaborators, and healthcare providers have *informal influence* through advocacy, trust-building, and collaboration, often going beyond their official roles. Lastly, it is notable how *informal hierarchies among inmates* are very present and can either complement or challenge staff authority, adding complexity to the institution's governance. These evident or hidden hierarchies can also create power imbalances and tensions that influence inmates' access to resources, participation in activities, and relationships with prison staff and external stakeholders.

We are here interested in discussing the dynamics in which inmates are main actors, and more specifically, those that regard Storylab directly. We consider the detained population a community within a total institution: although inmates might identify with shared conditions or experiences, such as detention itself or past crime history (Fleetwood, 2016; Presser, 2008), they do not choose to join and stay within this community of detained individuals. In this respect, we believe that the experience of Storylab is quite interesting. Coming back to the relational nature of identity (Arendt, 1958), as identity certainly plays a fundamental role in community-based Participatory Design (Di Salvo et al., 2012), we can identify the Arendtian in-between with the community. Therefore, we look at Storylab as a community based on storytelling.

The power dynamics that ensue within Storylab play a fundamental role in the way the narratives are shared and the direction the workshop takes. As Storylab mainly involves the inmate population of the Young Adult Section and the designers-researchers, we identify two central dynamics.

Within the inmate group (participants): although the relationship between individuals belonging to this category can be symmetrical, as the participants share the same plight, in most cases, it is not. The dynamics within the detained population of the young adult section often stem from informal power hierarchies

determined, among other factors, by age, wealth, ethnicity, knowledge of the vehicular language (Italian), and social proficiency. Through implicit codes of behavior, social alliances, or internalized norms of deference and authority, such dynamics may dictate who feels comfortable speaking, who takes leadership roles within the group, and whose narratives are validated or dismissed. Importantly, these influences can operate beyond the awareness of facilitators or volunteers, subtly shaping the dynamics of engagement and participation. Recognizing these underlying power relations is crucial for designing ethically responsive and adaptive participatory methodologies. Without an awareness of how informal hierarchies mediate participation, facilitators risk reinforcing existing exclusions rather than fostering genuine agency. As a result, Storylab employs an iterative approach, continuously adapting facilitation strategies to ensure that storytelling remains an inclusive and empowering process for all participants, regardless of their position within the prison's social order.

Between inmates and researchers: this relationship is inherently asymmetrical. As external stakeholders, the designers-researchers occupy a position of relative power, not necessarily in formal terms but in how inmates perceive them within the prison's ecosystem. Working in close collaboration with the educational services that hold power over access to workshops, educational opportunities, or even factors that indirectly contribute to sentence reduction through participation in rehabilitative activities places the designers-researchers within the broader institutional framework. Although the actual influence is limited, it matters in an environment where movement, choice, and agency are severely restricted. Participation in workshops isn't just an opportunity for learning or creative expression; it is often one of the few chances for social interaction, mental stimulation, or even just a break from the monotony of prison life. Because of this, inmates may see researchers as gatekeepers, leading to dynamics of deference, strategic self-presentation, or compliance rather than genuine engagement. To manage this imbalance that shapes the way people interact with Storylab, researchers employ a reflexive approach, continuously interrogating their role, fostering transparency about their position, and actively working to mitigate the unintended consequences of institutional proximity by ensuring non-coercive voluntary participation and critically questioning the ethical complexities of engagement in a total institution.

Finally, as one of the main objectives of Storylab is to disseminate a rendition of the narratives collected, the storytelling workshop acts as a bridge between inmates and the outside world. Stories are an essential method for processing information regarding the individual's reality (Reinsborough & Canning, 2010). Narrative work on the part of inmates can be considered a

meaningful window into their past actions (Fleetwood, 2016), but it also provides an insight into their need to develop effective counter-narratives. Allowing the stories collected in the context of Storylab to come into contact with the outside world means allowing counter-narratives that are born within the community to enter the public discourse, directly challenging the hegemonic narratives about offending and detention.

PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

The fact that San Vittore is a *casa circondariale* determines a high turnover rate in the inmate population. From a practical standpoint, this means that most, if not every, workshop session has multiple new participants who are not embedded in the network of storytelling identities that participatory practice creates. This un-embeddedness stems not only from the fact that they are not acquainted with the workshop and its other participants but also from the fact that they might not be acquainted with the practice of storybuilding and storytelling. To address these gaps, we present the participants with more introductory storytelling formats that do not necessarily require collaboration in storybuilding but encourage sharing. However, we noticed that the repetition of these activities became tedious for those who had been attending the workshop for longer and had already acquired a certain level of familiarity with narrative action. For this reason, along with the necessity of handling an increasing number of participants, we split the workshop into two working groups, an introductory one and a more structured one.

The high turnover rate mentioned earlier also entails that long-lasting relationships within this context are quite sparse, while contingent ones are the overwhelming majority. A characteristic of the relationship developed within the prison setting, especially these contingent ones, is a general lack of trust. The entrance of a new member within a workshop group, regardless of which one it is, causes changes within the network, which in some cases lead to tensions induced by power imbalances, personal feuds, or, again, simply a lack of trust. This lack of trust is endemic within the carceral context, and while it is fostered by the climate and power dynamics of the total institution, it is also to be regarded as an inheritance of the inmates' personal histories. During several Storylab sessions in which the themes of friendship and indeed trust were addressed, a general "trust no one" attitude seemed to be prevalent, especially among younger and self-proclaimed "from the street" participants. This attitude is in some ways the starting point for activities within Storylab, as it represents both a challenge and an issue for the workshop to address. It represents a challenge in that the network of relationships within a participatory storytelling practice needs a minimum level of trust. The narratives reported are often personal, representing a risk factor within a context like this.

What emerges is that any personal detail used against the individual, even in a playfully mocking way, leads very quickly to increased internal tensions. These tensions are particularly dangerous in the context of constraint and forced coexistence. While these circumstances might discourage practicing participatory storytelling, they also highlight a critical point that needs to be addressed, as this lack of trust prevents the formation of meaningful and supportive relationships and, therefore, community. The narrative practice is thus used to build up these relationships by paying attention to the way each activity and format impacts the interaction among participants.

As the workshop progresses, new activities are introduced, and old ones are periodically reintroduced. The change in activity is partly motivated to keep engagement up with group members who have attended the workshop for longer, but also to meet some of the research group's agendas, especially in terms of exploratory research. Activities are developed on themes or modalities of narration. In the first case, narrative formats revolve around the theme. In the second case, the emphasis is placed on the mode of storytelling, for example, a combination of spoken, visual, verbal, and eventually written and translated, in order to make all the different languages represented emerge and often favoring formats that rely on the co-creation. The observation of group dynamics usually drives the direction of the workshop and thus of these changes; sometimes the topic or even narrative mode of an activity comes as a direct request from one or more participants. Topics that emerge with consistency within the group (e.g., fear, relationships) are tackled to provide a space for narrative exploration. The specific objectives of the activity dictate other times, the choice of format and the final output, as is the case with material finalized for exhibitions.

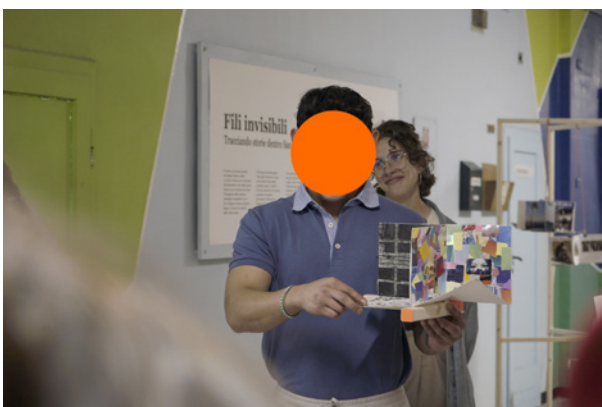


Figure 3: During a public opening of the exhibition *Fili invisibili* (Invisible threads), K., an inmate from the Young Adult section, explains his artifact to the visitors. Ph. Imagis Lab

THREE MAIN FORMATS FOR PARTICIPATORY STORYTELLING

Building on the framework described above and adapting it to the prison context, we have developed with the situated toolkit a set of activities that, through practice, have evolved into distinct formats. These formats differ in their narrative approach, level of collaboration, and degree of sharing.

Given the unpredictability and constant turnover of participants, the iterative nature of the design process has become essential. The activities unfold around semi-structured pathways, with new narrative components introduced at each session to reflect and collaborate on, producing a tangible outcome in a limited number of meetings while allowing participants to engage meaningfully.

The three prominent narrative formats developed and applied within Storylab at San Vittore —*Telling from fragments*, *Crafting stories*, and *Co-creating fictional stories*— are situated design devices that operationalize specific approaches to storytelling. Each format corresponds to a different mode of engagement, agency, and relational configuration. Their formulation draws upon theoretical contributions from narrative theory (Bruner, 1991; Hartman, 2008), participatory design and relational sensitivity (Akama and Light, 2018; Gottlieb, 2024; DiSalvo et al., 2012) and in field practice, articulating a progressive ecology of participation that accounts for both individual narrative literacy and group dynamics in a constrained institutional setting.

1. *Telling from fragments*

This format is based on the act of telling and leads to a collection of fragments (Bertolotti et al., 2015; Bertolotti et al., 2016; Piredda & Ciancia, 2022) of participants' stories through images and textual prompts. While images from the Storylab toolkit are laid out on the table, participants are invited to choose a few of them and explain why they selected them. Alongside the images, text prompts are grouped into thematic areas, including personality, relationships, places, past, present, values, and desires, that help enrich the evolving shared narrative.

This entry-level format is grounded in narrative elicitation through visual and verbal stimuli. Drawing from methods in narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1991) and storytelling, it allows participants to begin narrating without requiring narrative literacy. The visual prompts function as semiotic scaffolds that support the activation of memory and self-reflection, particularly valuable in contexts where verbal literacy may be uneven (Bruner, 1991). Agency here is emergent and exploratory: participants retain full control over what to disclose and how to name their experience. The result is a collection of life fragments, memories, and aspirations, forming a rich mosaic of micro-narratives.

Under the relational point of view, the goals of this format are, at first, creating a space for sharing and active listening and then fostering a small narrative community (Di Salvo et al., 2012) through the relational connections established between researchers and participants, participants and the group, and participants among themselves. For this reason, this format is reintroduced whenever there is a significant turnover of participants, ensuring that newcomers can engage with the practice in an accessible way while gradually integrating into the group. It also serves as an entry point into the storytelling process, allowing participants to familiarize themselves with the dynamics of sharing and listening.

2. *Crafting stories*

In this format, usually introduced after the first, participants narrate stories using a combination of images and words organized in a structured output (artifact). They are initially invited to collect a series of images from the toolkit spread on the table to build each one a story. Once they share an embryo of it using the selected images as the foundation for their narrative, they are given a handmade folding booklet to expand on it visually and textually. They create the artifact using pictures, drawings, and words, developing their narrative further. Since participants usually work on their biographies, they take advantage of the fragments shared and the images collected in the previous sessions, organizing them in a structured narrative that represents key moments of their personal stories.

The goals of this activity are to encourage self-expression while practicing storytelling and boosting sharing and active listening. While the story-making practice is mainly individual, in creating the artifact, participants often ask for the help of researchers and/or other participants for writing or drawing. This collaboration nurtures the relationships among the group and cultivates a sense of community.

This second format moves from fragmentary expression toward narrative composition, drawing on Bruner's notion of narrative as a mode of knowing and meaning-making (Bruner, 1991). Here, storytelling becomes both a personal and communal act.

Researchers also propose this format when an important theme emerges, allowing the possibility to elaborate on it at a personal level and collectively. In these cases, the toolkit can be enhanced with a new set of pictures, and *ad hoc* textual prompts and questions can support the group discussion and self-reflection.

3. *Co-creating fictional stories*

The third format focuses on building collaborative fictional stories (Bertolotti et al., 2016; Ciancia et al., 2022), using image prompts as a starting point. Through playful dynamics, participants engage in a structured yet

flexible storytelling activity that fosters creativity, cooperation, and narrative exploration.



Figure 3: A session of Storylab with inmates engaged in the co-creation of fictional stories. Ph. Imagis Lab

Each participant selects three cards from the toolkit without seeing them beforehand. Once everyone has their cards, those who feel comfortable volunteer to begin the story, using one of their three images as the starting point. The story can emerge from a place, a character, or an event, setting the foundation for the collective narrative. Then, in turns, each participant develops the story further by incorporating one of their images, weaving together different perspectives, ideas, and themes. Throughout the process, researchers support the activity by gradually introducing key narrative principles, providing a theoretical and practical understanding of storytelling structure while allowing participants to experiment and improvise. In this collaborative story-making practice, exchange and negotiation play a crucial role. Participants must listen, adapt, and build upon each other's contributions, fostering a shared creative space where individual and collective agency intertwine.

This advanced format, which draws from practices of collective fabulation (Hartman, 2008), can be played when the Storylab community is quite solid, and participants are familiar with the basics of storytelling as it requires participants to negotiate meaning, balance different perspectives, and make space for multiple voices. In this mode, agency is distributed and negotiated: each participant contributes to a shared narrative world, navigating difference, alignment, and improvisation. The format activates creative and dialogic skills, relying less on autobiographical truth and more on collective imagination. At the same time, within the constrained environment of the prison, this activity takes on a deeper function: it provides a space for agency and collective imagination, allowing participants to co-create alternative narratives that break away from institutionalized identities. By constructing fictional worlds together, participants not only practice creative autonomy but also reshape relational dynamics

within the group, reinforcing the idea that storytelling is not just about narrating but about building community and reclaiming self-determination.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper explores how a participatory storytelling workshop can function as a relational design practice within the constraints of a total institution such as a prison. In light of this exploration, we revisit our initial three research inquiries here.

Storylab responds to stimuli specific to the context in which it has evolved, generating an approach to participatory storytelling that is strongly situated (Haraway, 1988). This situatedness posits the participatory practice among marginalized identities in the space of the margin (hooks, 1984), in which lives a intricate web of relations and dynamics. Our approach in responding to the changes of this web in relational sensitivity has to be strongly relational. Many needs are not explicitly stated but must be understood through patterns of participation, withdrawal, enthusiasm, or resistance. Such patterns are not objectively quantifiable and require awareness of context dynamics to be effectively identified and addressed. Therefore, the evolution of *Storylab* develops as a dialogue, a back-and-forth sometimes direct but often made by small adjustments, and reception, actions, and reactions. Our role, then, is not to impose a predefined framework and provide an iterative process that welcomes pushes to change while still challenging the internal dynamics of the environment.

In what ways can participatory storytelling function as a relational design practice within the constraints of a total institution?

Storytelling takes place and shapes the in-between (Tassinari & Stazowski, 2020). As Arendt (1958) argues, identity is revealed in the presence of others—Storylab created a protected space where storytelling could perform this relational function, allowing participants to “become someone” in the eyes of others. In some cases, participants who were initially reluctant to engage used an image or a set of three images to narrate memories or deeply personal stories, prompting a spontaneous collective elaboration. Conversely, moments of reluctance also surfaced, such as when a participant dismissed storytelling activities as trivial, leading to an open discussion on narration and media representations of detainees. Sharing personal narratives has, on multiple occasions, proven to be a chance for reflection and identification. In one instance, a fifty-year-old detainee connected with a much younger participant on their shared familiar background in agriculture and livestock farming. While this example may appear trivial, it was a significant moment as it created a link between two demographics often incompatible, if not openly at odds, within the context:

the “old guard,” which in most cases consists of Italian men over the age of 40, and the “new generation” comprised mainly of young immigrants from North African countries. These moments exemplify how storytelling practices cultivate agency and identity negotiation (Presser, 2008; Fleetwood, 2016), and build, rebuild, and reshape relational infrastructures capable of reconfiguring interactions within the prison setting.

How might design research ethically navigate power asymmetries in total institutions such as prisons and engage with these power asymmetries while remaining ethically non-extractive and responsive?

One of the most significant limitations of this work lies in the impossibility of achieving genuine horizontality in a carceral context, which by definition, as total institutions (Goffman, 1961), impose asymmetrical structures of surveillance and control. Within this context, Storylab operates from a position of critical awareness, acknowledging it would be inaccurate, if not disingenuous, to posit researchers' relationship with the participants as horizontal because, as we explained, we still occupy a position of power in relation to them. This position of power determines a difference both in agency and responsibility to other actors in the process, placing our approach to participation closer to what Thorpe and Gamman (2011) define as a maternalistic approach, rather than a fraternalistic one. Recognizing these constraints does not mean abandoning participatory approaches or leaning on a paternalistic (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011) attitude, but rather working within them with a critical awareness of their limitations.

Throughout the sessions, a variety of dynamics emerge, offering insights into relational processes within the space of the total institution (Goffman, 1961). Enacting a participatory storytelling practice in prison pushes forward this challenge as it defies a status quo often based on a lack of trust, creating the right environment for relationships to form, strengthen, or reshape themes. From the experience of Storylab, we gather that these situated participatory practices need to be relationally sensitive, and this relational sensitivity requires being responsive to relational assets. What we define here as “relational assets” is nothing but that whole set of personal and structurally imposed dispositions that determine the unfolding of the relational network.

How does a participatory storytelling practice encourage the emergence of lasting relational infrastructures?

A crucial insight that emerged over time is the centrality of continuity and duration in relational design practices within complex contexts such as total institutions. As the workshop has been a permanent presence in the section for more than two years, we found that engaging in participatory storytelling with persistence enables the

construction of lasting relational infrastructures that rely on the emergence of pivotal figures. These pivotal figures, typically incarcerated people who, for whatever reason, find themselves spending more time inside the facility, take on roles of responsibility and leadership within the network. In this paper, we use the term "infrastructure" when referring to relational networks, as these pivotal roles often can survive the constant changes in the population composition. This infrastructure's "lasting" aspect lies precisely in its ability to survive these changes. However, this process has been neither linear nor guaranteed: participation remains fragile, shaped by individual motivations and structural constraints, and frequent moments of withdrawal or disengagement.

Each of the three narrative formats contributed differently to this relational ecology. The "Telling from fragments" (Bertolotti et al., 2015; Bertolotti et al., 2016; Piredda & Ciancia, 2022) format often acted as an entry point, enabling newcomers to engage and be heard, while more experienced participants learned to listen and offer recognition. The "Crafting stories" format encouraged deeper reflection and acts of self-exposure, frequently giving rise to interpersonal connections based on shared experiences or emotional resonance. Finally, the "Co-creating fictional stories" format fostered forms of collaboration and negotiation that reinforced a sense of collective authorship and mutual investment (Bertolotti et al., 2016; Ciancia et al., 2022). Together, these formats helped transform the act of narration into a shared social practice, through which participants not only made sense of their own trajectories but also constructed a space of co-presence and solidarity. The robustness of this narrative infrastructure has proven foundational in supporting further initiatives, such as *ReverseLab*, a participative art project, in which many of the participants were drawn directly from Storylab, demonstrating the lasting impact of the relational groundwork laid by the storytelling practice.

Making room for participants to choose the level of their involvement in the narrative work and having control of what constitutes the narrative allows for a gradual and conscious employment of these assets, granting agency within the space in which relationships are renegotiated. Storytelling becomes this space itself and the infrastructure within which these relationships are formed.

While the knowledge generated through this research is inherently situated, inevitably shaped by the specific context of San Vittore and by the relationships, languages, and dynamics we encountered there, we believe that much of what we developed is relevant beyond this setting. On the contrary, the methods, formats, and toolkit we have refined, precisely because they were designed to navigate barriers and

fragmentation, could be adapted to other marginal or complex environments, especially where language or trust are obstacles to participation. By sharing these insights, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse within the design community on how participatory practices can meaningfully address marginality, foster inclusion, and support the emergence of alternative narratives and collective forms of knowledge production.

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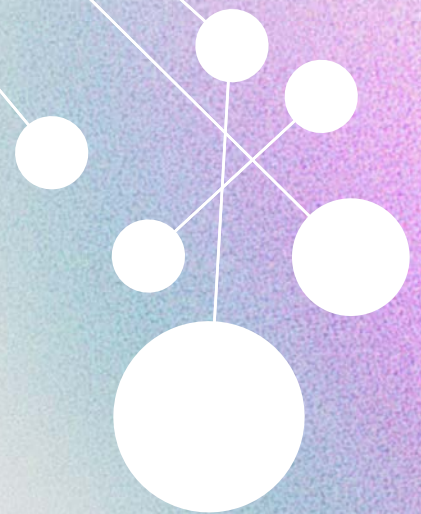
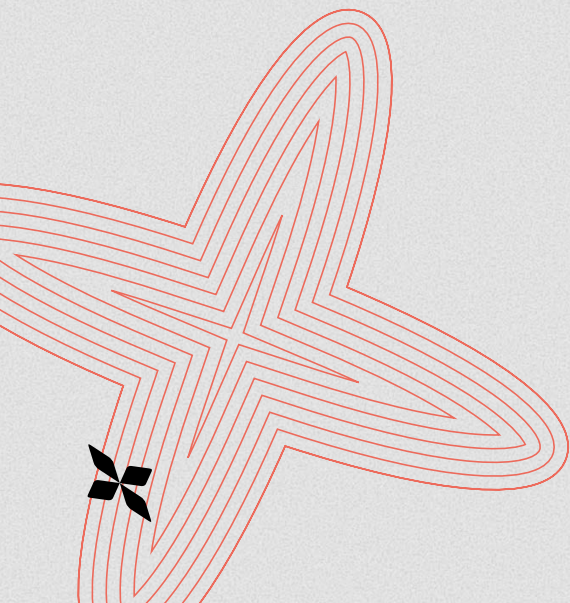
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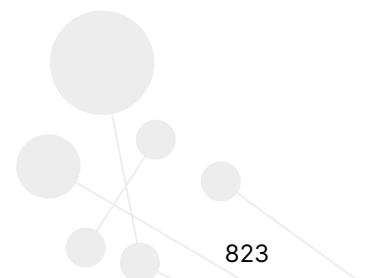
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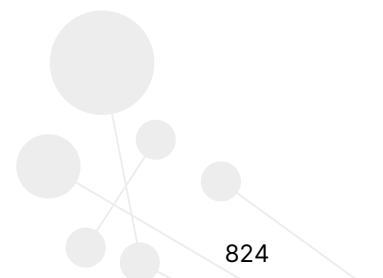
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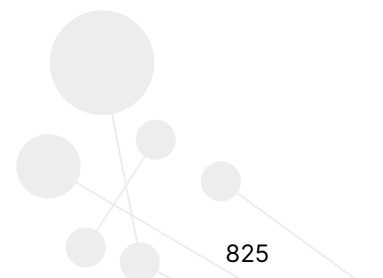
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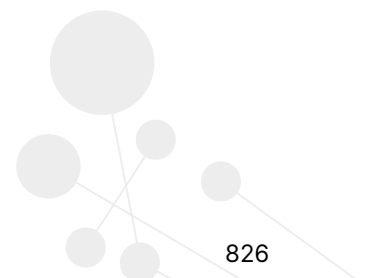
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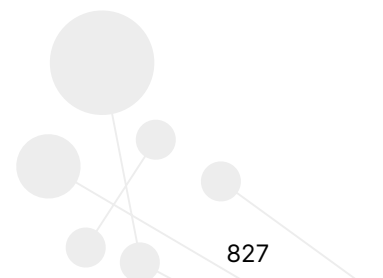
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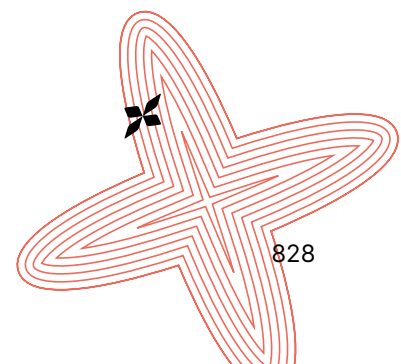
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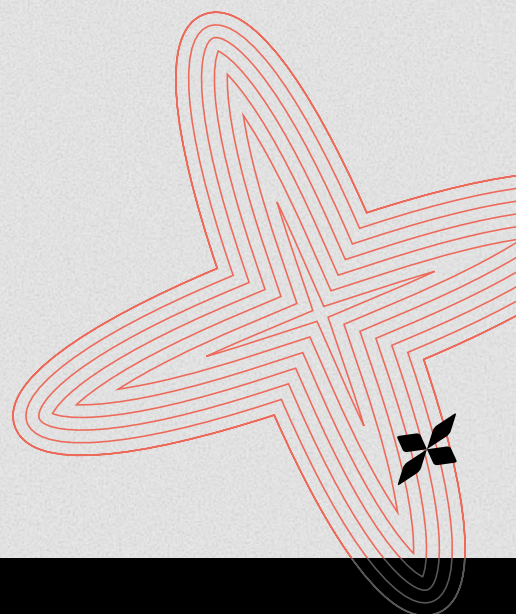
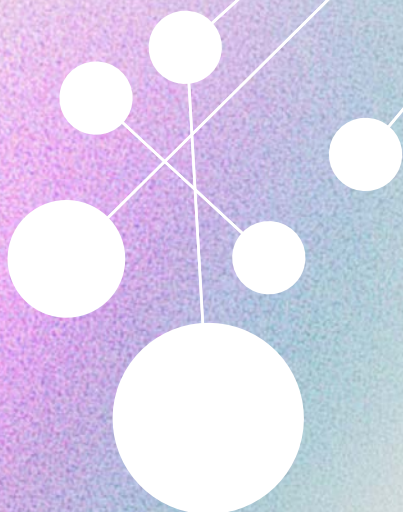


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