

# The Politics of Co-Design

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EDITORIAL



## The politics of co-design

When we, as editors of this Special Issue, started organising the *Participatory Design Conference* in 2018, we chose the topic “Politics of Design”. It was a plea for engaging politically as participatory designers. The *Participatory Design Conference* was held in Belgium, in a year that was characterised by municipal elections in the region. Not only on a local-level things were in motion; we were and are still facing several challenges on a global level: growing economic and social inequalities, climate change, growing migration rates, and a rise of xenophobia, right-wing upsurge and securitarian policies. *PDC2018*’s theme, “Participatory Design, Politics and Democracy”, questioned both the role of participatory design practitioners in the PD processes themselves and in the changing political landscape.

From a methodological perspective, we wanted to discuss how researchers and practitioners in academia, private and public organisations deal with design as a democratic process. To what extent can and should co-design be a fully democratic process, and how is this achieved in everyday practice? How does the growing embedding of design, researchers and research labs in people’s everyday lives and environments contribute to design as a democratic process?

From a thematic perspective, we aimed to discuss how important political themes are to co-design, how the actions of participatory designers relate to activism, and how co-design can contribute to giving form to our political systems. What might be meaningful political strategies for co-design? How do such strategies connect to the political tradition in co-design and the field of Participatory Design and how do they renew co-design’s political commitment? How might co-design be an appropriate political tactic in contemporary societies?

From the many contributors presenting at *PDC2018*, we invited a selection to revise and develop their contributions to share with the readers of *CoDesign* through this special issue. They were selected for both their specific focus and their capacity collectively to summarise the range of research directions presented at *PDC2018*. They connect with relation-making as an embodied experience (Akama and Light), the negotiations required by embodied ethics (Spiel et al.), how important it is to choose who to work with (Kendall and Dearden), methods to interpret the relations at play when co-designing to tackle societal issues (Mamello et al.), and success in establishing a relation with the government with co-design as a practice contributing to transforming education (Iversen et al.). It is our understanding that this multiplicity of research directions and political actions involving co-design researchers is at a level of maturity in which it is possible to respect and embrace the situatedness of co-design practices while contributing directly to the wider political landscape. In the introductory article (Huybrechts et al.), we look at how focusing on the situated relations between participants and

design researchers, contributes to the ways in which visions of the future are built. We are convinced that this is one of the ways through which the re-politicisation of co-design processes can be enacted.


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