

# A POWER LEXICON: EXPLORING ARTICULATIONS OF POWER DURING AN ECO-SOCIAL DESIGN SEMESTER PROJECT

Teresa Palmieri<sup>1</sup>, Kseniia Obukhova<sup>2</sup>, Jacopo  
Ammendola<sup>1</sup>, Sergio Previte<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

*The Masters in Eco-Social Design at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano is a practice-oriented, transdisciplinary programme exploring how design can contribute to more resilient, solidarity-oriented, and just futures. Towards this end the Masters collaborates with numerous citizen-led organisations, social cooperatives, and other everyday “change agents.” Despite power being always at stake in such co-design projects, talking about it remains complex. Designers often lack the language with which to address competing interests and power dynamics in design processes. Drawing from how power has been discussed in participatory design and from the findings that emerged from a research project exploring collaboration in social design education on the Masters, the paper articulates a “Power Lexicon.” The aim of the lexicon is to provide design students, researchers, and partners with grounded terms which can be employed to explicitly discuss and negotiate power dynamics in community-based design processes.*

## Keywords

power, participatory design, collaboration, eco-social transformation

1 Faculty of Design and Art, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano | Teresa.Palmieri@unibz.it

2 Hasselt University | kseniia.obukhova@uhasselt.be

3 OfficineVispa

## Introduction

Power is always at stake in design which seeks to change current situations into preferred ones. Participatory Design (PD) has long considered this aspect by working towards more democratic design processes (Simonsen & Robertson 2013) and genuine participation in PD is connected to principles such as “equalising power relationships” (Akama et al, 2024). Nevertheless, while PD done right can be a powerful tool for levelling power structures by giving voice, and agency to people, there is a risk of PD unintentionally reinforcing unequal power relations when power is not explicitly considered and discussed (Quazi 2018, von Busch & Pålmas, 2023). While the need to carefully consider power in co-design practices is well-known, what appears still to be missing is a language which enables designers and involved actors to explicitly and collectively discuss competing interests and power dynamics in design. This language should move beyond existing “terms wrapped in virtuous connotations” of design (e.g. participation, function, beauty, democracy, justice, etc.) to embrace a more “realist” perspective on power (von Busch & Pålmas, 2023).

In this paper we question: How does power concretise in community-based design projects? What kind of terms could we formulate to help designers collectively discuss power dynamics in such projects? To answer these questions, we first review dis-

cussions on power in PD literature. Hence, we reflect on how power dynamics unfolded in a case study of a collaborative semester project developed at the Master of Eco-Social Design at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (unibz) observed and analysed over a year. Drawing from the literature and the empirical exploration, the article proposes a “power lexicon” which aims to support designers, design students and researchers to explicitly discuss and negotiate power dynamics in design.

## Power in Participatory Design

Power is at the core of PD which starts from the assumption that those affected by design processes and outcomes should have a say in them (Greenbaum, 1993). Towards this end, PD has embraced mutual learning between designers and stakeholders while increasing attention for involving marginalised publics (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013; Bødker et al, 2022). By exploring where power is, making it visible and available for (re)discussion, PD aspires to democratise design and innovation (Guatam & Tatar, 2022).

While the rise of PD has been fundamental for considering power in design, power remains a matter of concern (Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022, von Bush & Pålmas, 2023). The move of participatory designers from the work, to the everyday realm has increased the complexity of power dynamics involved in PD processes,

with a higher risk of depoliticising design when such dynamics are not carefully considered (Huybrechts et al, 2017). Hence, community-based PD has been recently criticised for not being “realist” enough towards power. Designers have been called to move beyond sole facilitation to leverage or claim power when needed (von Bish & Pålma, 2023). Designers should be able to discuss how, where, and by whom power is handed over or taken up in view of unequal distribution of resources and agency (Mazè, 2014).

Considering decision-making as the exercise of power and as a transformative capacity, collective and horizontal decision-making has been key to discussions of power in PD. Sharing decision-making power is described as much more than sharing the possibility to select between design choices, it concerns the possibility to create and implement choices (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2014). This perspective recognises the designer as a powerful actor who can open design options for people to consider. As such it is fundamental for designers to enter projects without a specific agenda in mind which should be co-built with the community (Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022). Related to decision-making, trust has been approached as delegation of power in PD. Trust is required by all those involved: While designers enact trust when sharing decision-making with non-designers, non-designers need to build trust to-

wards design choices (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2014; Clarke et al, 2021).

Power in PD has also been articulated in terms of agency and described as the capacity to shape action (Bratteteig & Wagner 2014; Tomasini Giannini & Mulder, 2022; Søndergaard & Hansen 2017). In PD, designers have the opportunity to facilitate people’s agency by providing them with spaces and tools with which to act upon issues at stake (Søndergaard & Hansen, 2017). The common lack of agency by community actors in shaping their surroundings is connected to another PD concept: empowerment. Community empowerment has been explored as the improvement of direct democracy and of users’ position (Ertner et al, 2010). At an individual or group level, empowerment involves the development of knowledge and capacities, and the increased access to resources, decision-making, and social relations (Zame-nopolous et al, 2019).

Furthermore, the term agonism, borrowed from Mouffe’s theory about agonistic democracy, has been used to talk about democracy, power, and conflict in PD (Mouffe, 2013). Agonistic PD is thus connected to the enabling of multiple perspectives and values to emerge and be explored and negotiated between all the actors involved as equals (Gautam & Tatar, 2022). Agonism holds on to conflict instead of managing it into consensus (Gautam et al, 2024). Hence, agonis-

tic PD focuses on how design artefacts, processes, and practices can support pluralism in and through design (Geppert & Floriano, 2022).

In addition to the micro-politics of relations to which the concepts described above refer, recent debates have highlighted the need to further focus on institutional frameworks to properly understand power dynamics in PD (Huybrechts et al, 2017; Teli et al, 2022).

Such reflections have supported the emergence of a new articulation of power: institutioning, a term which describes dependencies and influences on institutional frameworks in design (Huybrechts et al, 2017). Finally, recent reflections have brought attention to the need to better consider external factors such as time,

money and unexpected events such as influences on power dynamics in co-design (Volkman et al, 2023).

While decision-making, trust, agency, empowerment, agonism, and institutioning are concepts that showcase the commendable ambition of PD to support the sharing of power within and through design processes, embracing a more “realist” perspective on power in design, as suggested by von Busch and Pålmas (2023), requires a further nuancing of these terms so that they can be used to facilitate collective and dialectical discussions on who holds, and should hold, power in community-design projects. Hence, with the lenses of the above - discussed PD concepts, in the next section, we present and reflect on a semester-long project on the Masters in Eco-So-

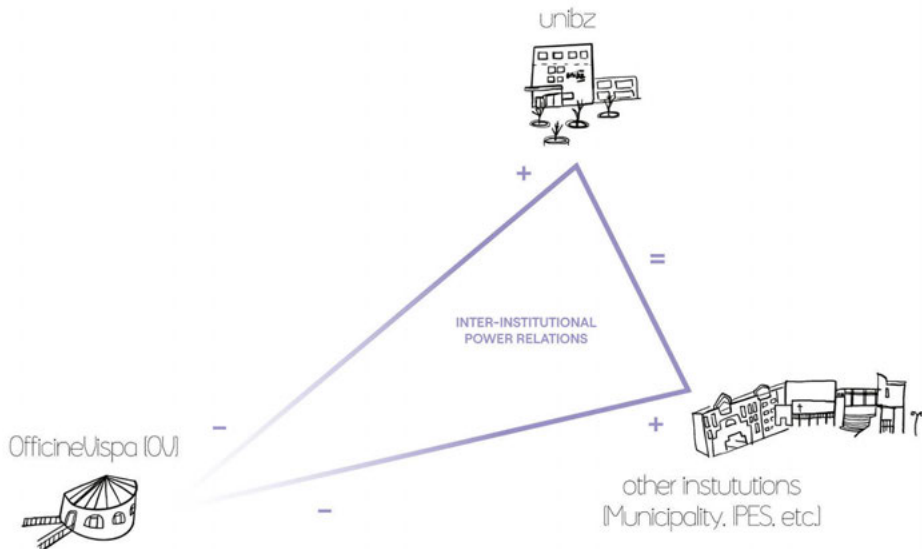


Figure 1: Vignette exploring the power relations in the preparatory phase of collaboration on a macro-scale, inter-institutional level

cial Design, with the intention of formulating grounded terms about power in community-based design.

## Power in Project 1

The semester project called Project 1 on the Masters in Eco-Social Design at unibz is an educational framework that introduces students to eco-social design at a local level. For this purpose, the Masters partners with OfficineVispa (OV), a social cooperative in Bolzano which develops community-building projects in peripheral areas of the city. Students and teachers collaborate with OV to introduce them to the local context and stakeholders, citizens, and public administrators. By getting into close contact with OV and the local community, students choose a topic grouped and in connection with local actors, develop a situated, collaborative, and modest project which can contribute to eco-social transformation locally.

During the winter semester 23/24, Project 1 was involved as a case study in Change Agents,<sup>1</sup> a research project investigating inter-institutional collaboration between higher education institutions and

NGOs in social design. This gave us the opportunity to explore and analyse Project 1 over the period of approximately a year with particular focus on approaches, dynamics, and experiences of collaboration. In the research, we adopted a “thick documentation” approach, a participatory method of mapping the subjective viewpoints of the actors involved in complex co-design processes, to enable their generativity (Schoffelen & Huybrechts, 2013). In the research project, the “thick documentation” was advanced by means of participant observation of collaborative activities, interviews, and participatory workshops with students, teachers, and local actors.

The research enabled the emergence of power as a key aspect of collaboration as it was described by a professor involved in Project 1: “The power dynamic is like a triangle or possibly a different geometric shape. It involved the partners’ relationship with the student, the students’ relationship with the community, and the partners’ relationship with all these factors.” Additionally, it made it possible for us to document experiences of how power unfolded in the collaborative process

1 “Change Agents: Blueprints for Interinstitutional Collaborations in Social Design” is an Erasmus+ co-funded project which involved international researchers in developing guidelines and tools which support the design academic sector and the NGO ecosystems to closely collaborate with one another in social design projects. The project recognised this collaboration as a core aspect of social design, not only to address the real needs of communities but also to recognise the already existing expertise of everyday “change agents.” The purpose of the project is to promote a more collaborative, inclusive, and participatory design education and practice. The project emerged from the social design network <https://socialdesignnetwork.org/project/erasmus-change-agents/>.

while showing that we lacked the language to openly and explicitly discuss power with all the actors involved in the semester project. In what follows, we present three “vignettes” on power dynamics in Project1 collaboration. Due to a lack of space, and since our aim is to articulate grounded terms able to support discussions on power in community-based design, we do not delve into the details of the semester project but offer grounded accounts describing how power dynamics concretely unfolded.

### **Vignette 1: Preparatory Phase**

The first vignette presents the “preparatory phase” of the semester project. Professors and OV operators meet to plan the inter-institutional collaboration. Other institutional actors (e.g. social housing companies, local civil servants, policy makers) might be involved too, e.g. in relation to public space usage or project implementation budgets. As the “thick documentation” has revealed, in such encounters the stakes of each institution emerge. The university participates in the collaboration to adopt a transformative and situated pedagogical approach rooted in designing with communities. The social cooperative OV is interested in collaborating with public institutions to grow as an organisation and demonstrate the capability to work with various actors, explore different perspectives on community work, and

advocate for peripheral neighbourhood communities. Other institutions (e.g. the social housing company IPES and municipality) may see such projects as an opportunity to become more accessible and participatory while imagining new ways to tackle local needs. With these interests at play, the structure of Project1 is established in ways within the most powerful institutions would risk dictating the rhythms, goals, and approaches, when interests and thus power relations are not explicitly discussed. For example, over the semester 23/24, OV expressed the objectives and rhythms of the collaboration being too often tailored to those of the academy and its desire for a more formal collaboration, while informality was valued by the university. IPES, contacted by the professors for using empty shops in the neighbourhood as part of the course, decided not to collaborate in such manner, requiring a rediscussing of the academic plan for Project1.

### **Vignette 2: Situating Phase**

The second vignette concerns the introductory phase of Project1. We have named it “situating phase” since newly arrived Masters students are introduced to the city of Bolzano and, specifically to the neighbourhood in which they will work with OV and the local community. In this phase, OV acts as a local “social hub” that mediates between the students and the neighbour-

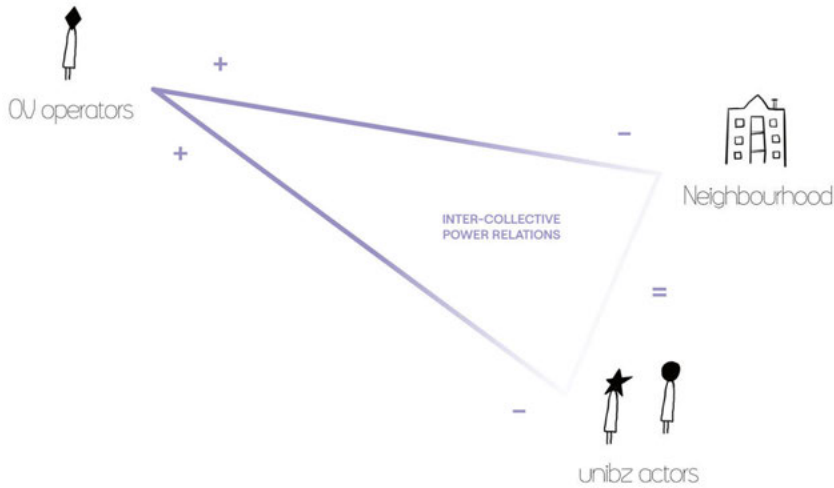


Figure 2: Vignette exploring the power relations in the situating phase of collaboration on a meso-scale, inter-collectives level

hood community. Over the semester 23/24, one of the most significant activities of this phase was a neighbourhood “Partner Forum,” a gathering organised by OV in collaboration with professors that helped students to learn about the neighbourhood, its actors and their activities, and vice versa, introduced the local community to the students and design opportunities. The aim of the event was thus to facilitate the establishment of early connections which could potentially develop into eco-social design projects over time. Being the link between community and university, OV emerged as a powerful actor in this phase. Nevertheless, such power, as mentioned by OV, comes with great responsibility. Being the one responsible for introducing the community to the students might ultimately risk making OV accountable for the success or failure of the collaboration, especially once the students leave

at the end of the semester. In the “situating phase,” particular care towards the community actors invited into the collaboration is required. As the “thick documentation” suggested, during the “Partner Forum,” community actors appeared to lack power due to their limited understanding of what the future collaboration actually entailed and their possible role within it, despite their interest in exchange with the students.

### Vignette 3: Co-Creating Phase

The last vignette presents what we have called the “co-creating phase” of Project1. While students explore the neighbourhood, its main actors, and their activities, some connections form and ideas develop. Every collaborative project as unique as the power relationships it can involve. For instance, over the semester explored here,

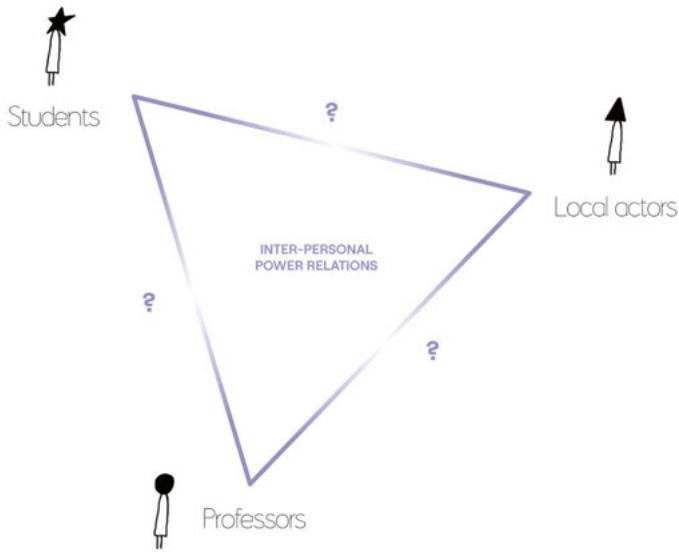


Figure 3: Vignette exploring the power relations in the co-creating phase of collaboration on a micro-scale, inter-personal level

a group of students co-created collaborative games with a social worker supporting his practice of experiential learning as part of his job as a social worker. Starting from a process of mutual learning, they co-created an agenda for the project which implemented collaboratively sharing decision-making power and prototyping tasks. Another group worked for several weeks with a local actor to develop a community radio. Nevertheless, after a first engagement, the students decided to stop the collaboration since their approaches of giving voice to the local community significantly differed in methods and intentions from those of the local actor. Here, power was at stake in terms of negotiation and agency over the project. In another case, a group of students collaborated with several local actors on a project about biodiversity edu-

cation. As more actors joined the collaboration, more interests were involved. A conflict arose due to a disagreement between the students, who needed physical space to work on the project, and the local actors, who did not see the benefit of sharing their space for a one-time project. Here, power emerged as a conflict between diverging interests and mutual benefit. Professors were also involved in the intricate web of power dynamics of co-creation. They supervised students, assessing the projects' eco-social agency and ensuring the course was empowering for the students whilst also attending to the local community. The professors' assessments of the design process and outcomes needed to continuously be juxtaposed with those of local actors as experts of their own lives, another example of – never conflict-free–power-sharing.

## Discussion

Exploring power in Project1 through the lenses of power-related concepts in PD enabled us to define seven terms which could have facilitated a more explicit, collective and dialectical discussion of power dynamics throughout the semester project.

The first vignette brought attention to how power dynamics unfolded in organising Project1, at a macro-scale level, between institutions. The semester project involved various institutional actors each contributing their perspective in planning the collaboration: a process of institutioning (Huybrechts et al, 2017) in which institutional cultures and ways of working shaped Project1. The “thick documentation” revealed the interests at play during the planning phase, though these interests were rarely, if ever, explicitly addressed. From this experience, we derived a first term for our lexicon: instrumentalising. This term focuses on how power can shift between institutions to enhance each other’s positions in terms of openness, innovation, public acknowledgement and acceptance. Instrumentalising brings attention to the need for engagement with different institutional interests at the outset of inter-institutional collaboration to ensure just power relations, agendas, and ways of working.

The research also uncovered the tendency to lean towards academic needs in Pro-

ject1, e.g. the collaboration was based on informality, valued by the university for its enabling of adaptability and flexibility and avoiding of bureaucratic hurdles, but which clashed with OV’s desire for a more formal collaboration. Additionally, OV pointed out that the collaboration’s objectives and rhythms were more aligned with the academy than with the community and community work. To address such issues openly, we coined a second term: sandboxing. By relating to matters of decision-making and agency in PD literature, this term supports discussions about who has the power to (re)define the ground for collaboration between institutions (e.g. in terms of rules, roles, aims, timeframes, rhythms, etc.) opening up the possibility for consciously developing more balanced collaborative frameworks.

The second vignette presented how power dynamics played out during the “situating phase” of the semester project which unfolded at the meso-scale level between collectives of university, community, and OV actors. Our analysis revealed that power in this phase was linked to the capacity to connect the academy with the community. This positioned OV as a powerful actor due to their role as “social hub” facilitating networking between the university and the community. The “thick documentation” showed a lack of clarity in terms of who invites whom in the collaboration, which could lead to unacknowledged

edged, incomplete, or biased representation of the explored context and its actors. From this, we have formulated the third term: thresholding. Drawing from PD literature on trust as a form of delegated power, thresholding highlights the need to examine who has the ability and thus is trusted by others to assemble the actors initially involved in a community-based design project.

The “thick documentation” also revealed that during the “Partner Forum,” community actors often lacked understanding of the collaboration’s purpose and their potential role within it. OV operators noted that they frequently took it upon themselves to bridge the gap between academia and everyday language to help the local community to engage with the collaboration. Building on this experience and concepts of agency in PD, we have coined the fourth term: translating. This term focuses on the power of storytelling, helping to explore who has the power to link complex, eco-social design themes to the micro-scale political level of people’s everyday life, thereby creating space for meaningful collaboration on complex social and environmental issues.

The third vignette reflected on power during the co-creation phase of the project on the micro-scale level, specifically in the interpersonal relationships between students, professors, and commu-

nity actors involved in individual design projects. The “thick documentation” suggested that, to support balanced power relationships, students, professors, and community actors should engage in mutual learning. This requires students and community actors to adopt an open mindset, allowing an agenda to emerge from their shared exchange of skills, needs, and ambitions. Simultaneously, community actors and professors must be willing to engage with each other’s feedback and share their power to make judgements on the projects’ value to support students to concurrently confront everyday needs and eco-social issues. While necessary, this sharing of power is rarely discussed critically. Therefore, we introduced the fifth term: releasing. Drawing from PD theories on trust and decision-making, releasing can be used to facilitate dialogue about the capacity to share power with others in a design process in ways that involves trust and the re-negotiation of one’s own position. Additionally, our analysis also demonstrated that co-creation becomes possible when students, community actors, and professors can agree, dissent, or compromise on a project’s values, agenda, and goals. This process is summarised in the sixth term: negotiating. Closely related to the PD concepts of decision-making, as the ability to choose, create, and implement choices and to agonism, as the creation of spaces for pluralistic encounters, the term em-

phasises that only when all involved actors are in the position to negotiate, can collaboration be democratic. This power needs to be openly addressed to give voice to all those involved and to support collective ownership of a project.

Through reflective discussion with the students, professors, and community actors, a key question often arose related to who benefits from the collaboration and if a project is—or even can be—a reciprocal exchange between all those involved. These reflections led to the formulation of the seventh and final term: reciprocating. Nuancing concepts of empowerment in PD, reciprocating discusses power dynamics as the capacity of actors to respond to the diversity of needs that emerge within the collaboration, as well as a project’s ability to empower both students and local actors.

## Conclusion

While PD has long addressed the issue of power in design, recent calls have emphasised the need for a more nuanced and realistic perspective on power in collaborative design practices (von Bush & Pålmas, 2023; Quazi, 2018). Drawing from the insights from PD discussions about power—in terms of decision-making, trust, agency, empowerment, agonism and institutioning—this paper has reflected on how power unfolded in the semester project, Project1. This reflection enabled us to identify and

define seven terms grounded in concrete experiences of power in community-based design, which, in hindsight, could have supported us to engage in more explicit, collective, and dialectical discussions about power dynamics as they emerged during the semester project.

While these terms are not a complete list of power dynamics in Project1, by sharing them along with three vignettes that illustrate the experiences from which they emerged, we aim to enable other designers and design researchers to embrace such terms to explicitly discuss emerging power dynamics with all those involved in community-based design projects. Hence, we hope to promote a design language that openly addresses power dynamics, encouraging designers to adopt a realist perspective on power by expanding the “power lexicon” based on their own experiences of community-based design.

## Acknowledgments

The research has been developed within the framework of Change Agents, a project co-funded by the European Union’s Erasmus+ programme. The project consortium consists of six higher education institutions (MOME, unibz, EKA, UdK, ELISAVA, Shenkar) and two NGOs as associated partners (OfficineVispa in Bozen-Bolzano and Democratic Society in Berlin). We would like to thank everyone who contributed to

the development of Change Agents on the local level, including students, community members, and colleagues from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano.

## Bibliography

Akama, Y., Chen, K., Imanishi, H., Kikuchi, Y., Kushinsky, S., Teasley, S., Teerapong, K., & Yee, J. (2024). Recasting 'shadows': expanding respectful hierarchies in participatory design practices. *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2024*. ACM. 52–62. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3666094.3666096>

Bødker, S., Dindler, C., Iversen, O. S., & Smith, R. C. (2022). *Participatory Design*. Switzerland: Springer Nature. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-02235-7

Bratteteig, T., & Wagner, I. (2014). Disentangling Participation: Power and Decision-Making in Participatory Design. <https://doi.org/10.1007/9783319061634>

Clarke, R. E., Briggs, J., Armstrong, A., MacDonald, A., Vines, J., Flynn, E., & Salt, K. (2021). Socio-materiality of trust: co-design with a resource limited community organisation. *CoDesign*, 17(3), 258–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2019.1631349>

Ertner, M., Kragelund, A., & Malmborg, L. (2010). Five enunciations of empowerment in participatory design. 191–194. *Proceedings of the 11th Participatory Design Conference*. ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1900441.1900475>

Geppert, A. & Forlano, L. E. (2022). Design for Equivalence: Agonism for Collective Emancipation in Participatory Design. *Participatory Design Conference 2022*. ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3536169.3537790>

Greenbaum, J. PD: A personal statement, CACM 1993.

Gautam, A., & Tatar, B. (2022). Empowering Participation Within Structures of Dependency. *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2022*. ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3536169.3537781>

[org/10.1145/3536169.3537781](https://doi.org/10.1145/3536169.3537781)

Gautam, A., Tatar, D., Matheis, C., & Kannabiran, G. (2024). Surfacing Conflicts in Participatory Design: Methodological Considerations. *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2024*. ACM. 194–197. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3661455.3669891>

Huybrechts, L., Benesch, H., & Geib, J. (2017). Institutioning: Participatory Design, Co-Design and the public realm. *CoDesign*, 13(3), 148–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2017.1355006>

Mazé, R. (2014). Our Common Future? Political questions for designing social innovation, in Lim, Y., Niedderer, K., Redström, J., Stolterman, E., & Valtonen, A. (Eds.), *Design's Big Debates - DRS International Conference 2014*. <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2014/researchpapers/41>

Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: thinking the world politically*. London: Verso.

Qazi, H. (2018). *Power and Participation: A Guidebook to Shifting Unequal Power Dynamics in Participatory Design Practice*. Carnegie Mellon University.

Schoffelen, J., & Huybrechts, L. (2015). Sharing is caring. Sharing and documenting complex participatory projects to enable generative participation. *Interaction Design and Architecture(s)*. 18. 10.55612/s-5002-018-001.

Simonsen, J., & Robertson, T. (2013). *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*. In Routledge eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108543>

Søndergaard, M. L. J., & Koefoed Hansen, L. (2017). *Designing with Bias and Privilege? Nordes 2017: Design and Power*. [www.nordes.org](http://www.nordes.org).

Teli, M., McQueenie, J., Cibin, R., & Foth, M. (2022). Intermediation in design as a practice of institutioning and commoning. *Design Studies*, 82, 101132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2022.101132>

Tomasini Giannini, F., & Mulder, I. (2022). Towards a power-balanced participatory design process. *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference 2022*. ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3536169.3537781>

Design Conference 2022 - Volume 2. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3537797.3537819>

Volkman, T., Dresel, M., & Jochems, N. (2023). Balancing Power Relations in Participatory Design: The Importance of Initiative and External Factors. Extended Abstracts of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI EA '23). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3544549.3585864>

Von Busch, O., & Palmås, K. (2022). The corruption of Co-Design: Political and Social Conflicts in Participatory Design Thinking. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003281443>

Zamenopoulos, T., Lam, B., Alexiou, K., Kelemen, M., De Sousa, S., Moffat, S., & Phillips, M. (2019). Types, obstacles and sources of empowerment in co-design: the role of shared material objects and processes. *CoDesign*, 17(2), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2019.1605383>

