

Tales of Institutioning and Commoning

Participatory Design Processes with a Strategic and Tactical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

With the concept of infrastructuring as a background for our reflections, this paper focuses on two complementary verbifications have entered the PD vocabulary: *institutioning*, which describes engagement with institutions, and *commoning*, which describes engagement with grassroots communities – and by extension alternative economic frameworks that challenge the status quo. We contribute to this discourse to reflect, theoretically, on themes emerging from the triad of relationships between designers, institutions, and grassroots communities. We do so presenting ‘tales’, excerpts of our own PD work with institutions and grassroots communities. In this way, we present a nascent conceptual framework that offers analytical potential to promote pluralist understandings of PD scholarship and practices.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design**.

KEYWORDS

institutioning, commoning, co-optation, intermediation, entanglements

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1 INTRODUCTION

The backdrop of our contribution consists of efforts of thinking about research in participatory design (PD), and close fields like human-computer interaction, as politically active and engaged, e.g., looking for renewed understanding of contemporary capitalism and its alternatives [9, 37, 47], conceptual interpretations of the work by designers on platforms [77], or attention to the climate emergency and environmental sustainability [26, 44, 60, 78]. In light of this, we focus on commoning and institutioning, as two ways of relating infrastructuring practices to power redistribution

and alternative forms of governance. Our premise is twofold: first, that infrastructuring introduces a procedural view on information infrastructures [97], and second, that in PD infrastructuring has been adopted to look at various processes and projects [64], from the workplace [98] to communities [33] and publics [70, 71, 115].

To set the scene we first present related works in PD scholarship across institutioning and commoning in section 2. This provides a basis to distil key insights gained thus far, which inform our approach to examine the relationships between design researchers, institutions, and grassroots communities in section 3. The main analysis is threefold. First, we look at institutioning and introduce the tale of the *City of Logan* to discuss the themes of co-optation and intermediation (section 4). Second, we focus on commoning and introduce the tale of *Macao* to comment on publics formation and entanglements (section 5). Third, in section 6 the tale of *RiMaflow* helps us illustrate the dichotomy between genuine societal transformation or participatory discourse akin to ‘innovation theatre.’ Section 7 brings all three sides of this triad together in a synthesis before we conclude in section 8.

While the paper presents three vignettes of empirical data we call ‘tales’ to illustrate our argument, the type of our contribution is better characterised as a theory paper [127]. Our goal is to contribute to PD theory and also to respond to the PDC 2020 theme of *participation(s) otherwise*. Accounting for our collaboration and co-creation work with institutions and grassroots communities, we have built our reasoning as a way to analytically inform pluralist understandings of PD.

2 RELATED WORKS

In the background of our contribution stands the understanding of Bødker et al. that “infrastructuring activities that engage users in processes of design and use” [17, p. 246] entail multiplicity and complexity in terms of different arenas of action and the backstage of participatory encounters (see also [49]). In particular, we rely upon the work of Lyle et al. [82] who, building on ongoing conversations on strategies and tactics [18, 72, 73, 83], stressed the importance of the “combination of strategic and tactical actions by the different social aggregates with which researchers build relations” [84, p. 10] when reading the changes in capacities for action of the involved actors at different times in a PD project. In these analyses, two different sets of social actors are considered: existing institutions and activists engaged in commoning practices. Our paper investigates

the relations between existing institutions and activists engaging in commoning practices through the concepts of institutioning [46, 61] and commoning [89]. These relations have been conceptualized as *middle out*, in between institutions – seen as rigidly hierarchical – and grassroots – seen as inherently innovative –, and for designers they entail a need to acknowledge responsibilities, the possibility of being assimilated, and the need for long-time commitment [35]. We take this as a background in treating institutioning and commoning as lenses to look at the processes at play, assuming less rigidity in the way institutions and grassroots communities operate.

Institutioning was introduced to the PD community by Huybrechts et al. [61], who highlighted how design projects immersed in the public realm participate in the stabilisation, unmaking, and renewing of the frames through which the institutional actions of a project can be conceived: the metacultural frame, referring to the role of institutions in light of wider societal concerns; the institutional action frame, referring to the way institutions self-describe themselves, and; the policy frame, referring to how institutions are described at the operational level, as in policy guidelines, etc. [23]. Huybrechts et al. [61] define the institutional frame as a space for action for PD projects and that, at the same time, can be reshaped by the projects. Elaborating on this, Lodato and DiSalvo [80] discuss the mechanisms through which institutions constrain PD, delimiting the design space in the first instance by restricting long-term design engagement, and through ideological differences. Discussing institutioning in the light of commoning practices, it is possible to engage in a comparative analysis of institutioning in design projects [117] and to outline various practices that design researchers can engage in, such as: carving out space for action, relying on legitimising social relations, and aiming for a critical mass of participants as well as for relevant allies [25].

Commoning practices entered the PD discourse slightly earlier than institutioning [89, 107, 108] and, since then, have been elaborated as an explicit “new utopia in PD” [113]. These works have relied upon political and philosophical literature [56, 93] to point to practices that nurture social collaboration and the emergence of collaborative subjects [105], often in contrast to capital accumulation [116, 118], for example promoting the opening up of previously proprietary practices [88]. In the case of commoning, research has pointed to the need to take into account the installed base, to recognise the temporality of existing or of newly produced arrangements, to stress transparency and make governance explicit, as well as considering the materiality of the infrastructures at play [88, 109]. Exploring the relational space between institutions and grassroots communities, Crivellaro et al. have pointed out how designers and their allies work in conditions of uncertainty while exploring complexity [29], a conclusion shared by researchers working in a commoning framework.

With this paper, we contribute to further understanding the uncertainty at play, connecting institutioning and commoning as lenses to dig into the ‘middle out’. Here we do not focus on the wide scale-making perspective proposed by Foth and Turner [46] when discussing infrastructuring, institutioning, and commoning. Instead, we concentrate on *the situated processes in which design researchers can find themselves involved when engaging with projects where institutioning, commoning, and infrastructuring are all legitimate and*

useful lenses for analysis, therefore involving design researchers, institutional actors, and grassroots communities at the same time. As grassroots communities have been defined as self-organised groups often acting in contrast with established top-down organisations [67], design researchers find themselves in between institutions and grassroots communities, working to manage the social, material and political conditions that define the complexities of a PD process. Where Vlachokyriakos et al. [122] have stressed the negotiated tactics that develop between grassroots solidarity movements, design researchers, and institutions, in this paper we aim at providing an analytical framework capable to temporarily disentangle the strategic and tactical actions part of the agenda and practices of grassroots communities, design researchers, and institutional actors. As we will show, the proposed analytical framework can enlighten the construction of alliances, the mapping of different – often conflicting – goals and interests, and to navigate the tensions at play while keeping PDs emancipatory goals as a fundamental priority.

3 APPROACH

On the basis of abductive reasoning, we present critical reflections and actionable knowledge derived from our own experience with PD projects in the relational space involving designer researchers, institutions and grassroots communities (see Figure 1). To do this, we draw inspiration from the contributions of Light and Miskelly [77] and Ekbia and Nardi [37] who have built compelling cases for complex intellectual tasks – namely rethinking approaches to scaling / meshing in relation to platforms and communities [77] or discussing computing and capitalism [37] – relying on previous research as illustrative cases. Ekbia and Nardi [37] refer to the approach of articulating their analysis of computing and capitalism as ‘stories’ constituting the different chapters of their book. Given the difference in scope between a paper and a book, we do not pretend to tell stories, but still think that empirical vignettes coming from previous research, which we refer to as ‘tales,’ serve the goal of this paper, which is to discuss the possible processes that PD researchers experience when interacting with institutions and grassroots communities.

Under the overall rubric of institutioning (section 4), we illustrate two processes, referring to a design research collaboration with a local government in Australia adopting a PD approach. The first process, ‘co-optation’, refers to the involvement of design researchers by institutional actors in processes in which the institutional actors are strategically pursuing their own agenda. The second process, ‘intermediation’, refers to design researchers strategically approaching and involving institutional actors.

Next, in section 5, we look at the relationship between design researchers and grassroots communities under the rubric of commoning. Introducing examples from the Europe-based Commonfare project, we discuss the concepts of ‘publics formation’ and ‘entanglements.’ Publics formation refers to strategic initiatives undertaken by the design researchers aiming at promoting the aggregation of people around specific issues. The concept of ‘entanglements’ highlights how design choices, methodological options, and communicative actions draw directly from grassroots initiatives.

Finally, in section 6, we discuss redundancy, the set of situations where designers: retreat from projects and hand over responsibilities to institutions or communities; were not on the forefront of ongoing processes with institutions; and/or grassroots communities are engaging in a “design” project with each other directly, both instrumentally or through conflicts.

Before we begin our exploration, it is pertinent to acknowledge that we use the model depicted in Figure 1 for conceptual and analytical purposes to illustrate our argument, being aware that the worlds of institutions, grassroots communities, and designers are not easily compartmentalised. For instance, Cunningham [31] showed how ‘embedded creatives’ are employed in other industries, including government institutions.’ Manzini [86] as well as Kaptelinin and Bannon [63] made similar observations discussing how designers act in a design role within an organisation, be they grassroots, or institutions. We also acknowledge the irony that many PD scholars are themselves embedded within an institution, which points to some of the constraints and barriers our institutional position may impose on others wanting to work with us [46]. Finally, we accept that all three tales discussed in this paper can contribute insights on institutioning, commoning and redundancy. However, the paper’s scope required us to limit our analysis.

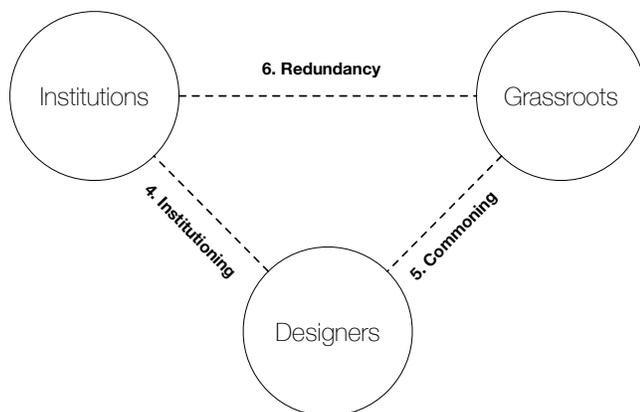


Figure 1: Relationships between institutions, grassroots organisations and designers, discussed in sections 4, 5 and 6.

4 INSTITUTIONING

The relationship between design researchers and institutions can be framed in terms of institutioning, that is, reciprocal framing and influencing mediated by the PD process. While institutions frame PD processes, designers with the ability to consciously navigate this influence can elicit transformations in the institutions they interact with, and in doing so re-politicise PD and embrace its original emancipatory qualities [61].

In this section, we foreground a tale about the City of Logan in South-East Queensland (SEQ), Australia, which espoused interest in participatory urbanism and citizen co-creation as part of their strategic intent to foster urban innovation. In particular, through the lens of institutioning we will discuss a co-creation workshop we facilitated with city staff and members of the public. We discuss

how the misappropriation of participatory design practices can reinforce systemic issues rooted in neoliberal smart cities [22, 80]. We highlight two relevant mechanisms of mutual influencing between designers and institutions: (1) *co-optation*, which describes institutions acting strategically and assimilating PD processes with a potential loss of their emancipatory qualities; and (2) *intermediation*, when design researchers act strategically aiming to trigger institutional transformation. As part of an analytical framework, these concepts allows designer to orchestrate the backstage of participatory engagement and to reflectively act with a conscious intent to mitigate co-optation and strengthen intermediation.

4.1 Tale of the City of Logan

We tell this tale, centred around the City of Logan, by first briefly presenting key characteristics of the city before providing details and the backstage to our study, which is part of broader comparative research we conducted in SEQ discussed in detail elsewhere [7]. It serves to illustrate co-optation and intermediation as key issues of institutioning, as the study practised PD with cross-sectoral urban actors led by a collaboration between PD researchers and a local government entity [41].

Logan is part of the Greater Brisbane metropolitan area. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that Logan has high levels of socio-cultural and ethnic diversity with over 200 different ethnicities, a median age of 34 and thus one of the youngest demographics in Queensland [5]. About a quarter of Logan suburbs are within the 20% most socio-economically vulnerable in the country [106]. Logan is stigmatised as a problem area with high levels of crime and unemployment due to concentrations of disadvantage, a stigma perpetuated by racial and ethnic implicit bias [124]. Yet residents feel pride for the diversity and solidarity in their community [130]. With a new mayor in 2017, Logan City Council (LCC) was determined to change the public perception of Logan and address socio-economic realities by focusing on collaboration, co-creation and collaborative governance models to foster innovation [13].

LCC approached us to conduct a PD workshop in Logan in November 2017 to inform a co-creation model for an innovation hub. Together with stakeholders from LCC we developed two workshop objectives: first, to facilitate an encounter between diverse local stakeholders, including city staff, with expertise relevant to co-creation models and innovation spaces; second, to explore the vision, principles and implementation of an urban innovation hub [15] facilitating co-creation between the council, academia, business, citizens, and civil society to address local challenges. Figure 2 offers a glimpse into this encounter, which afforded the opportunity for participants to influence the strategic and high-level elements of an ongoing co-creation model, as opposed to only particular operational elements.

Instead of focusing on specific use-cases, we sought to more generally address the stigma of Logan by re-envisioning how residents can contribute to socio-economic rejuvenation of the city through co-creation within the hub. We emphasised shifting the perception of residents away from an image of deprivation and deficiency towards one of valuable contributors, and in particular of those from other ethnic backgrounds or lower socio-economic



Figure 2: Photo from the co-creation workshop in Logan.

strata [14, 128]. Matters of principles, governance and agency took precedence throughout the format and workshop material. The results were effective in allowing people to envision different models for organising the relation between communities and LCC.

4.2 Global City or Renewal from Within?

At the workshop, we distributed participants from LCC, academia, local businesses and community organisations as evenly as possible across five groups. We asked each to present their co-creation models. It was community representatives, in most cases, leading these presentations. The groups seemed to collaborate well, seeking to find common ground around the city’s socio-cultural diversity and to resolve stereotypical community vs local government conflicts. In its presentation, one group emphasised that the “council is on board, they are not the problem”, to which the group member from LCC nodded in agreement. While groups seemed to experience convergence rather than conflict, we witnessed two competing rationalities of urban renewal at play. Four groups focused on local solidarity, capacity-building, and building on existing local initiatives. In contrast, one group aimed for a flagship to build an image of success and national and international recognition. The language and framing of this group’s model was influenced by start-up culture, competitiveness, projected image and retained a certain level of co-management. This misalignment reflects competing priorities, but also global economic power structures forcing competition between have and have-not cities [24, 123]. The pressure of inter-city competition requires local governments to invest large amounts of capital into prestige-enhancing projects that reflect the image of an innovative city [52].

At the time of the workshop (November 2017), it was not known to participants outside of LCC, including us, that a site for the innovation hub had been designated to be the Kingston Butter Factory (KBF), a heritage-listed building housing a museum, and community arts, crafts and dance groups. As plans for the site to “help foster entrepreneurship and provide a space for new business and investment” [2] were publicised, residents expressed discontent, e.g on Facebook: “You[re] changing a space to make way for new business when at the same time you[re] potentially closing another small business that has been the heart of the Logan dance community for decades.” Between the workshop (2017) and the time of writing this paper (2019), amidst corruption investigation the council’s mayor and councillors were removed. We have also witnessed a change in plans: the KBF will be refurbished and retained as an arts and event space, while the innovation hub will be delivered at the headquarters of a local start-up [81, 126]. To this, a social media user on Facebook wrote: “It[s] not going to be a tech hub thingy now??”

They kicked us out for nothing??” [4]. On its official website, the project states that after refurbishing, some previous tenants will be moved back in [1]. This public debate articulates similar power struggles between competing group objectives as our workshop outcome. A Facebook user expressed relief at the new plans: “That sounds better than the original idea of turning it into a business and office zone. That was a ridiculous idea. [...] A performing arts centre would be a much better option” [4]. Nonetheless, it seems some in the community feel it came at a loss: “So basically you are restoring it back to what it was already... a community venue that hosted many [...] performances, festivals, markets and outdoor performances. What a waste of 12 months and a loss to all those originally involved” [3].

4.3 Co-optation

The first issue we want to analyse with this tale is co-optation. The concept rests on two premises: (1) that countercultures pose symbolic threats that could destabilise the ‘common sense’ rationalities through which dominance is maintained by hegemonic structures, and in response; (2) that expressions of opposition “are repositioned within dominant frameworks of meaning and denuded of their transgressive sociopolitical significations” [120]. Emancipatory and subversive methods of protest, such as tactical urbanism [92], have been adopted by local governments without questioning overarching neoliberal economic rationales. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli [120] propose a nuanced analysis of co-optation, which reveals not mere assimilation of methods, practices and outcomes of the counterculture, but the production of countervailing power through the amplification, implementation and active promotion of its meanings, ideals, and principles. Countervailing serves to not only mask co-optation, but also to perform “ideological recruitment” in view of socialising and recruiting individuals into hegemonic structures.

The growing appetite for co-design in the public sector [121] harbours the distressing risk of defeat of its (emancipatory) intentions by organisational practices [112]. Our tale illustrates the risks of co-optation surrounding PD not only in obvious ways through the appropriation and framing of PD practices to legitimise predetermined outcomes. The more nuanced understanding above draws attention to the risk of adoption of a distorted version of PD’s ethos of emancipation, democratisation and social transformation. The question is, whose (presumed) emancipation, and transformation to the benefit of whom?

In the obvious – and, in our case, perhaps more harmless – first manifestation of potential co-optation, previously confidential LCC reports made public the year after the PD workshop [28] reveal pre-existing interest in a “hub and spoke innovation model,” while at the same time one of the workshop outcomes used a physical space as a “flagship” to be connected to other innovation spaces. One can only speculate whether that particular group developed the idea independently, or was influenced by prior knowledge held and shared by city staff who were part of the group.

A more problematic and countervailing form of co-optation might distort PD’s ethos of empowerment and social transformation through the lens of neoliberal hegemony [58]. In its theoretical

essence, neoliberalism represents a resurgence of *laissez-faire* capitalism. This belief manifests itself not only in the general reduction of the size and responsibilities of government, but a shifting role of government from a direct steward of the welfare of its citizenry, to the promoter and enabler of a free market – and innovation by private business. The prolific embracing of entrepreneurialism by many local governments as the key enabler of innovation [57] risks ‘painting’ an urban innovation hub in the same ideological colours. The municipality then becomes an enabler of the market – and neutraliser of grassroots countercultures. It does so by providing resources as part of a hub to ‘empower’ technology start-ups already entangled with powerful capitalist actors through venture capital to lead ‘transformational’ change and ‘solve’ city problems that are, paradoxically, rooted in the systemic inequalities of neoliberalism itself [22]. As LCC has abandoned using the initial site for the hub, refurbishing it as a major events and community space, it has partnered with a local start-up with global reach to deliver the innovation hub at their premises, which are in proximity of other entrepreneurial ventures [81]. This *could* be interpreted as successful recruitment of local government to neoliberal ideology.

Rather than simplistically raising accusations of deliberate co-optation, we would like to underline both the complexity of institutional policies, politics, structures, and barriers that may constrain the field of action of city staff [8, 30], as well as the increasing pressure for cities to be competitive in global economic markets [52]. Neoliberalism, in its variegated forms [20], benefits from convincing government leaders to believe that market-based solutions, for example rooted in entrepreneurialism, are common sense and without alternative [39] by simultaneously creating the very conditions that sustain them, such as a fiscal environment of government austerity. Institutions then risk imparting this frame on PD processes, thus defining the “distribution of the sensible” [100]. Crivellaro et al. [30] exemplify this in the context of city parks services, where the government austerity at the root of issues was never challenged by participants. This reframing undermines crucial values underpinning PD practices, such as civic engagement, power redistribution and conflict negotiation that challenge hegemonic forces in society [42, 45, 71].

4.4 Intermediation

Following on from the perspective of institutions taking a strategic interest in adopting design methods and risking co-optation, we now turn our attention to the opposite direction: Designers seeking to embed PD processes and their emancipatory ethos within institutions. At face value, the first and arguably most prominent development in this space is design thinking, about which much has been written. While design thinking has merit, it also comes with significant problems and challenges [62, 65, 66, 101, 129], which to do justice would go beyond the scope of our discussion.

Nonetheless, it is useful to examine one significant issue with design thinking, which allows us to follow up by introducing a counter-proposition embedded in the tale of the City of Logan. The issue we refer to has been described by Lodato and DiSalvo [80] as “the sandbox,” which is related to another institutional constraint they describe, the “ideological mismatch.” Design methods and practices often clash with institutional cultures and norms. Designers

like to engage in lateral thinking, establish flat hierarchies, conduct brainstorming that is free and uninhibited; whereas institutions are often characterised by procedural thinking, complex hierarchies with long decision-making cycles, organisational politics, and predictable, low-risk actions based on policies and guidelines. While many institutions have started to adopt design strategies of sorts, this is often reduced to what has been coined ‘innovation theatre’ [21] in more critical business circles. It allows an institution to show that innovative design thinking is being practised, but it does not go beyond the experimental “sandbox” that has been set up – either figuratively as a pilot, experiment or prototyping phase distant from the institution’s core business or critical path, or; literally as an outsourced space, as was the case with LCC – where design thinking is performed with stakeholders and consultants. This sandbox continues to exist within stifling organisational and political decision-making structures to which PD outcomes from the sandbox need to be handed over to the uncertain environment that encapsulates it [30].

Our PD work with LCC showed some resemblance of these issues. The main lesson from our collaboration with the city thus far can be summed up as follows: for PD processes *and values* to proliferate [47], scale [46], and penetrate into institutional environments, we need to recognise that perfecting design skills per se does not resolve the ideological mismatch [80].

We need to consider the right mix between depth (excellence) and breadth (reach) of PD skills, methods, and practice, and expand the PD repertoire to more explicitly embrace the communication, sense-making, dot-joining, frame-shifting, advocacy, and diplomacy skills and capabilities required to reconcile the interface between the institutional action frame and the PD frame. That skill set is best described as cultural brokerage [90] borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the cultural intermediary [27]. After engaging with the complexities of local government and community, and the tense relationships both across internal departments and between the two, design researchers report unintentionally inhabiting the role of ‘mediator’ [8, 30, 85]. While designers often tend to do this naturally and tacitly [103], intermediation comprises an explicit body of knowledge and practice in its own right [6]. Intermediation as a methodology can be learnt, taught, applied and perfected as a complementary skill set [40, 50, 51, 119], which in turn can make designers more effective at institutioning. To this end, active reflection by the designer on the frames through which the institutional actions of a project can be conceived is indispensable in becoming aware of a potential ideological mismatch and mitigating risks of co-optation. Mitigation could entail, for example, strategies of hiding ultimate intentions, adapting to unintended effects, and co-owning resulting new intentions, as suggested by Srinivas and Staszowski [112].

5 COMMONING

The relationship between designers and grassroots communities can be framed in terms of commoning, that is grassroots practices that nurture social collaboration and the emergence of collaborative subjects. Such collaborations proliferate in community-based PD,

which presents a wider range of social relations and more heterogeneous forms of participation than those foregrounded in formal organisations and institutions [34].

In this section, we present a tale about the Commonfare project, a project including empirical activities in Croatia, Italy, and the Netherlands, and aimed at designing a digital platform (commonfare.net) as a way of exploring, recognising, and promoting grassroots forms of welfare provision [11, 19]. In particular, we will focus on the relation established with a grassroots community in Milan, *Macao*, the struggle between them and municipal institutions in the city of Milan as well as their experimentation with digital currency. Elaborating on some of the issues that have been considered formative to the future of the field of community-based PD [34], we underline how the formation of publics [71] and the entanglements between design researchers and critical standpoints [105] are two aspects that need to be taken into account in the collaboration between designers and grassroots communities. As part of an analytical framework, these concepts highlight the implications of building meaningful alliances for the public presentation and the technological choices done during a PD project.



Figure 3: Picture from the Macao story on commonfare.net.

5.1 Tale of Macao

In Italy, a significant number of collectives and experiences operating in various domains (arts, housing, healthcare, work, sport) have joined the design activities and subscribed to the digital platform commonfare.net to share their stories and initiatives. The most visited Italian story published on commonfare.net¹ relates to Macao, an independent centre for art, culture and research occupied by artists and workers of the cultural industry based in Milan, and one of the “bottom-up welfare good practices” involved in the research [48]. The story¹ accounts for the notice of eviction that Macao received from the municipality of Milan, which, according to the author of the story, wants to sell the building regardless of the valuable activities and initiatives that Macao has organised in the course of its occupation of that building. The story (see Figure 3) contains a summary of the evictions that occupied spaces in Milan

¹Commonfare story: *Far sparire Macao (ma in modo soft)*

have undergone, and it continues by describing the most significant initiatives and events that Macao has organised in the building involved in the notice of eviction. As we read:

*a space born to be a museum from below, a catalyst of people’s desires, and which has become, over time, a place of cultural and artistic experimentation that has opened fields of research (from the economy of events to bitcoins and complementary currency experimentation) and generated extraordinary meetings.*¹

The story stands in solidarity with the goals, values, and practices put forward, even though some of them – such as the occupation of the building – is considered an illegal action according to the Italian law. The story also denounces the lack of vision characterising the municipality (formal owner of the building), which seems more interested in selling the building to collect funds to fill the gaps in the municipal budgets than to value the cultural energies expressed by Macao, whose benefits have been felt by a significant amount of citizens.

5.2 Rituals and coins

The collaboration between Macao and Commonfare has also concerned the development of a crucial component of the commonfare.net platform, that is the digital currency called “Commoncoin.” Commoncoin is a digital token non convertible to any fiat currency, which can be used on the platform to reward Commoners’ contributions (e.g. stories), to acquire second-hand goods or services, and to donate to Commonfare groups to finance their initiatives. The development of the Commoncoin in Commonfare has been largely borrowed from the implementation of the digital currency that Macao has operated in order to foster the alternative economy on which part of its functioning is based. The collective based in Milan has started the implementation of a local digital currency several years ago to remunerate the labour provided by the members of the collective to maintain the space they occupy: cleaning, bar work during parties, administrative work, participation to the periodic assemblies, and more [125]. Part of the proceeds (in Euros) of the artistic activities of the cultural centre is allocated to a fund and periodically distributed among the people active according to criteria Macao has developed at their recurrent assemblies.

The study of the practices of Macao, as well as their direct involvement in the design of the “social wallet” supporting the internal transactions [102] have become the core component of the design of Commonfare’s digital tools to support “group currencies,” that is the ability for grassroots communities to handle their own currency. Moreover, this model has been part of an experimentation Macao and Commonfare organised during the Santarcangelo Festival, an international performative and contemporary scene festival in Italy. During the 2018 edition of the Festival, Macao and Commonfare organised the artistic performance called “Crypto Rituals,” which introduced a complementary digital currency named “Santa Coin,” (see Figure 4) implemented as the first instance of the Commonfare “group currency.” The currency can be used to purchase “body rituals” (massages, manicure, haircuts, and other beauty treatments) provided by the local “body artisans” and other festival services

(food, drinks). The Santa Coin was developed in the form of a talisman carrying a QR code to be scanned to check the balance and latest transactions on commonfare.net.



Figure 4: Talismans at ticket office at Santarcangelo Festival.

The “Crypto Rituals” performance was meant to make more sustainable the development of various autonomous productive activities within a logic of commoning. According to a commonfare.net story by Macao:

Once the Festival will end this year, the enablers of the project will gather to understand together what to do with the surplus value that Crypto Rituals could produce. Perhaps, the decision will be to claim that “relaxing” should be an accessible practice and a common good, or maybe that the mayor of Santarcangelo should receive her salary in SantaCoin or still that something now unpredictable will in fact happen. What we are interested in is to stimulate people to imagine different economic and relational environments and to think about who they are and what they do within these environments.²

Unlike the story about the potential eviction in Milan, here the tone used towards public institutions betrays a collaborative stance with institutional actors, with the mayor of Santarcangelo mentioned as one of the actors that might benefit from the experimentation with the digital currency. The mayor of Santarcangelo has in fact hailed the performance at the festival organised by Macao, accepting the invitation to join the discussion as to how to manage the surplus money deriving from the performance, as well as to collaborate to foster a local economy based on the Macao model.

5.3 The formation of publics

The tale of Macao witnesses an alliance between designers and NGOs addressing critical issues such as precariousness, low income and unemployment, which has resulted in a mutual cross-pollination in terms of events and technologies developed. The story of Macao framed within the Commonfare project is also a good example showing a particular configuration of relations between different parties involved (designers, a grassroots community, and institutions), with a clear conflict between the community and the municipality of Milan, and designers needing to balance different agendas. As a matter of fact, although both Macao and the

municipality of Milan supported the Commonfare project since its inception, the emergence of a conflict between the two entities is based on different, often conflicting, organisational goals and practices, insofar as Macao is a community that occupies a space belonging to the municipality, which sent a notice of eviction to the occupants. The position of designers in this conflict has been quite delicate and committed not to exacerbating divergences, but rather to highlighting points of convergence around shared issues, for example addressing welfare crisis through the potential of digital technologies, using the platform to fulfil needs and duties (e.g. sharing stories in the case of Macao, provide and check information on welfare state provisions in the case of the municipality).

The emergence of collaborative subjects we see in the tale of Macao can be framed in terms of “formation of publics” [70, 71], understood “as a particular configuration of individuals bound by common cause in confronting a shared issue” [71, p. 243]. This definition is particularly enlightening for the PD community, because it ties the formation of publics to societal issues emerging or gaining visibility [87]. This acknowledgement is important, because it implies that the constitution of publics is neither a smooth process nor a universal one, but rather it comes into being with contention and conflicts through which a conglomeration of different stakeholders confront each other around shared issues.

In debating issues, recent contributions have explored the cooperative potentials of digital artefacts as well as the critical role of design as a strategy for researchers engaging with cooperative activism [91], a form of commoning. What the case of Macao shows with respect to the capabilities of PD to support the formation of publics is that this process can take place in relation to both *use before use* and *design after design* activities [16, 36], which play a key role in articulating open conflicts between different stakeholders that contribute to the same project. For example, the design choices to build a storytelling tool with features discussed with participants (e.g. no likes, no ratings, no social media sharing buttons, the possibility to add comments) allowed people and collectives to articulate their instances and conflicts within a (digital) environment perceived as safe and friendly, and that has, on its own, favoured the dissemination of the same result of the design process, in this case commonfare.net. In this respect, designers’ choice to build alliances with NGOs and local organisations in order to foreground politically-engaged concepts and practices (such as Commonfare) becomes a crucial step towards the design of engaged and situated design artefacts. We address this issue in the following section.

5.4 Entanglements

The particular connections between critical perspectives and design practices has been further articulated in terms of ‘entanglements’ [105]. This term points to a crucial inseparability between knowing and making practices [10], which has been explored as a “politics of mattering” to account for “the design process as an always-relational becoming and its practices as already-political” [96].

In the case of Commonfare, the entanglements between PD and critical theories (such as feminist thinking or Autonomous Marxism) identify how a clear political stance of PD can have an impact on the formation of alliances with local communities, on the organisational practices of structuring such alliances, and on the related design

²Commonfare story: *Take Care and Make Your CoinMACAO at Santarcangelo Festival*

outcomes [12, 105]. What the concept of entanglements underlines with respect to the Commonfare project is that the diversity of theoretical approaches and perspectives is not neutral in shaping the object of design itself along with the design processes. Such an understanding of theories as performative drawn on the body of reflections developed in Science and Technologies Studies, which argue that theories – be they theoretical concepts or theoretically-argued perspectives and sensibilities – play a key role in sensitising the vision of researchers and shaping methods, goals, subjects and objects at stake in research projects [69].

Such an understanding of critical theories and concepts looks like an “interference” [68], that is, the act of making differences by means of descriptions and knowing practices. This appears to be even more significant for design research, whose goal is not only that of generating knowledge around socio-technical issues, but also creating artefacts that are never innocent, since they imply certain configurations of subjects, objects, practices, and power [79]. The case of Commonfare and the tale we have reported shows that entanglements between critical understandings of the world and design practices can take shape by building up networks of actors with overlapping theoretical positions in parallel to their understanding of how Commonfare (intended as concept, practice, and their translation into the digital platform *commonfare.net*) could be shaped. The role of designers, in this respect, is that of fostering the design of sociotechnical assemblages – methods, processes, technologies, and theories – in which conflicts and shared positions can be articulated and collectively addressed.

Moreover, the tale of Macao shows that design can contribute to the relation between grassroots and institutional actors by both introducing new technical components and by re-using others already developed and experimented in other contexts. For example, the specific implementation of digital currencies in Commonfare, through the “group currency” functionalities, has been a design component that the project has built starting from the already existing experiences of Macao and of one of the project partners, Dyne.org (that had already worked with Macao before). It is with this example that the concept of entanglements shows all its interpretative potential to explain a possible way whereby designers can explore collaborations with grassroots communities, that is rethinking, translating and adapting previous artefacts to new ones. As Barad points out, “to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” [10, p. ix]. If reading the development of Commonfare’s digital currencies through these words, we realise that the group currency implemented on *commonfare.net* is not a self-contained, independent entity, but that its functioning and “reason for being” cannot be separated from the previous experiences in which it originated.

6 REDUNDANCY

The last part of Figure 1 directly connects institutional actors and grassroots communities and it refers to different scenarios that can take place. First, when engaging with political transformations, it is a necessary humble move to acknowledge that political dynamics exist before (and after) design projects and, therefore, the presence of design researchers can be made redundant [40, 119]. Secondly,

in the particular institutional context in which design research is taking place, often with time-limited funding, becoming redundant as a design researcher can be a desirable outcome. Finally, the aforementioned presence of embedded/diffused designers in institutions and grassroots communities make often the presence of design researchers unnecessary from the point of view of the institutions or communities in achieving their goals [18].

The tale we present in this section, also coming from the activities conducted in the Commonfare project, describes instead a situation of conflict, and it allows us to comment on two opposite tendencies we can identify in the relation between institutions and grassroots communities: the presence of a participatory discourse without effective allocation of power to the grassroots communities; or the effort of the grassroots communities to push forward agendas that are transformative of how institutions work.

6.1 Tale of RiMaflow

RiMaflow³ (also written Ri-Maflow) is the result of the automotive manufacturing company Maflow moving their operations internationally for profit reasons, and is the response of the former workers at the company, who eventually in 2013 occupied the factory, formed a cooperative enterprise, and shifted the focus of work to reuse and recycling electronics. It has since expanded, employing over 80 people and including 35 artisans, and engaging in activities including an organic market and providing co-working spaces [15]. We consider it a grassroots community given its foundation and cooperative method of operation. Its expansion also involved wallpaper recycling for a time, based on recycling and maintaining old machineries, in an effort to convert production more and more towards an environmentally sustainable model. RiMaflow are considered by the Commonfare project to be an example of a *good practice* (based on criteria of being reproducible, effective with a positive societal impact, innovative, sustainable and transferable) to be championed and used to promote other similar enterprises [48]. RiMaflow itself was inspired by examples in Argentina, and have become part of a larger international network of workers in recovered factories, that meet every two years.

As the Commonfare project was engaged in pilot work in Italy, with a local partner also based in Milan, this provided the basis for our perspective on the events that unfolded between RiMaflow and state institutions when:

*On July 27th, 2018, an investigation by Milan prosecutors led to the seizure of six waste recycling companies and to the arrest of nine people, including Massimo Lettieri, President of the Ri-Maflow Ccooperative, and the seizure of the shed used for the wallpaper recycling activity within Ri-Maflow. They are accused of illicit waste disposal.*⁴

The story continues to emphasise the response of local and international actors who spoke in support of RiMaflow’s goals and activities. On 28 November 2018, on the date that the bank Unicredit had ordered their eviction, a *commonfare.net* story from RiMaflow reported that over 500 people from various backgrounds (e.g. trade unions, associations and other grassroots communities

³Commonfare story: *Ri-Maflow - Recovered factory*

⁴Commonfare story: *Ri-Maflow vivrà!*

in the Milan area) stood at the gates from the morning to defend against the eviction notice. The post explained that the bailiff did not appear, and the eviction was delayed until the end of April 2019, allowing for continued operation of RiMaflow and time for the hopeful release of the president:

*“This postponement allows us to open negotiations, whose results, albeit uncertain, will be able to keep alive a model of work and social solidarity alternative to the logic of profit and financial and territorial speculation” – said Gigi Malabarba, one of the spokespersons of RiMaflow.*⁵

The conflict related to the eviction has been solved and RiMaflow has been granted a new space, another building formerly owned by Maflow, through long negotiations with Unicredit bank and the municipality, and a campaign called “RiMaflow vivrà” (RiMaflow will live) in which the Commonfare project was a background element, as a digital tool for communication with commonfare.net or as a proof of the social relevance of RiMaflow through the inclusion among the selected good practices. For example, an international meeting of repurposed factories (like RiMaflow) was hosted during the heat of the conflicts and negotiations, and Commonfare partners also hosted a session during this meeting as well as provided financial support for the real-time translation of the speeches.

6.2 Transformation or Discourse

The tale about RiMaflow tells us something about how PD projects and researchers can find themselves helpful but almost redundant in situations that can involve participants, especially grassroots communities, in their adversarial relations with institutions. RiMaflow is certainly, in its values and actions, aiming for the flourishing of forms of solidarity and cooperativism and, in doing so, is also rethinking production, as in the case of recycling wallpaper. Nevertheless, the particular situation from which everything originated, the global trend towards relocation of production and subsequent unemployment for the workers, points toward RiMaflow as a positive case to look at forms of societal transformation. This is not the first case, obviously, as in the famous plan developed by workers at Lucas Aerospace in the UK in the 1970s [111]. In the case of RiMaflow, we can nevertheless observe how the support of design researchers – one difference with the Lucas Aerospace case – has been present but (as mentioned before) design researchers could have been made redundant, not playing a key role in any of the actions undertaken by the grassroots community to articulate, promote, and enforce their political agenda.

An opposite situation can take place, following a logic similar to the aforementioned risks of co-optation of design researchers in section 4, when institutions look for the involvement of grassroots communities without following up on such involvement with effective forms of power sharing. That can follow different logic, but we can testify that there is the risk that participation turns only into a participatory discourse supporting choices made through other channels [94]. The case of RiMaflow shows that the relationship with institutions can become highly conflictual, reducing the space for the participatory discourse to thrive when issues that are fundamental for the way a grassroots community defines itself, in

⁵Commonfare story: RiMaflow resists: the eviction postponed to 30 April 2019

this case a place of work, solidarity, and mutualism are at stake. The renewed interest from both academic and activist circles in Lefebvre’s [75] *right to the city* [43, 59, 95, 110], rooted in Marxist humanistic worldview appears as potentially capable of counteracting forms of participatory discourse. The resonance with RiMaflow is astonishing when we consider that the right to the city seeks to “move beyond both [the institution of] the state and capitalism” [99, p. 142]; resisting these two powerful actors who own the means to produce the city and therefore are shaping the goals, lives and destinies of urban inhabitants; resisting the submission to the market towards rebuilding social relationships and urban governance based on grassroots self-management [74].

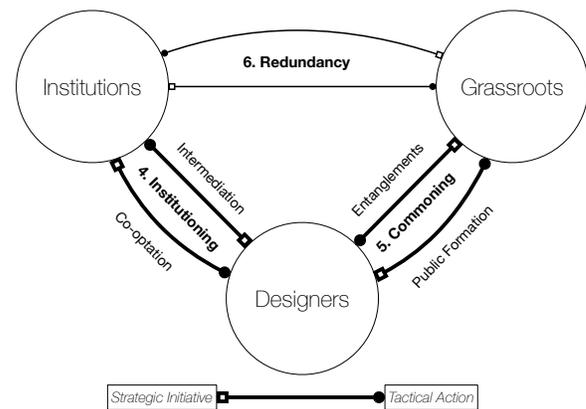


Figure 5: Elaborating on possible framing of relationships in terms of strategies and tactics.

7 CONNECTING THE THREADS

In our discussion of the existing PD literature on institutioning [61] and commoning [89], we argued for combining these two lenses as ways of reading PD projects and the different positions design researchers can assume in the wider relation between institutions and grassroots communities. In particular, we stressed how we aimed at focusing on the processes in which design researchers can find themselves involved when engaging with projects in which institutioning, commoning, and infrastructuring [46, 64] are all legitimate lenses to look at a project.

To do that, we built up a preliminary model, a necessary simplification of actual practices, to be able to read the complexity of the ongoing relations, and we aimed at adding some details connecting the processes of institutioning and commoning to a way of reading the actions of institutions and grassroots communities, the lens of strategies and tactics [84]. In this way, we identified five concepts to think about our work as design researchers in the light of the above processes and relations: co-optation and intermediation, as ways to focus on institutioning; the formation of publics and entanglements, as ways to focus on commoning, and; redundancy, when the design researchers are only lateral to the described processes (see Figure 5). On the basis of this preliminary conceptualisation, we run through three different tales, one of institutioning, one of commoning, and one of redundancy, to connect the theoretical framework to the lived experience of two PD projects in Australia and in Europe.

What is left is to reconnect the dots of the expanding argument that our tales have brought forward.

When looking at the tales comparatively as suggested by Teli et al. [117], and thanks to the language of strategies and tactics, what we see are conflicts over power that manifest in different ways. If the situated practices we described – from staging participatory encounters to building instruments for self-expression or financial management – have already been conceptualized in PD in relation to situated power dynamics [76], our analytical framework connects the situated choices to broader political-economic and social contexts if researchers and practitioners seek to use PD as a mechanism for social transformation [47, 113]. Therefore, PD researchers and practitioners can benefit from a conscious, explicit, and systematic analysis of the dominant political-economic narratives of a PD project’s context [55]. Being aware that only from a situated perspective it is possible to understand the power relations, institutional culture, internal policies, and organisational barriers limiting the authority and scope of action of institutional actors [8], we think that our analytical framework can provide an initial guidance in connecting the wider political narratives with the situated practices of PD. In the context of cities like Logan, for instance, our analysis point to a consideration of multi-level governance configurations [32] and it suggests that borrowing insights from institutionalism studies in political science [46] can enable PD researchers to grasp a better understanding of a project’s manifestation and embeddedness in multi-level governance structures.

The political-economic rationale at both local and higher levels feeds back to directly influence institutional cultures and objectives, and therefore initiatives. PD not only needs to be (re-)politicised, but also be located and strategically applied within the specific political-economic context. This is when focusing on entanglements of theories, lenses to look at the world, design processes, and grassroots actions, constitutes a necessary and relevant move [105], as well as its interrelation with processes of publics formation [45, 70]. Such an approach can be promoted by design researchers in conjunction with grassroots communities when, as highlighted, the issues at stake are crucial for the experience of communities themselves. That is particularly relevant when, as in the tales from the Commonfare project, there are opportunities to make radical alternatives visible, and by doing so recurrently and continuously as part of a PD project’s setup that confers them legitimacy, gradually change the dominant narrative by “making presence” [104].

Activism, dissent, protests, and subversive approaches are traditionally seen as mechanisms of challenging power [38]. They are vital in making visible opposition and to promote the formation of publics, and therefore of political pressure. However, there is also a need for alternative and pluralist opinions, ideas and voices within the system. These voices to some extent may already exist but require visibility, solidarity, and legitimacy, and to be linked together to resist the narrowing effect of multi-level governance structures, internal bureaucracy, and dominant neoliberal hegemony. This is where design researchers engaging in intermediation can find another arena for critical intervention.

Bringing together all those threads in practice requires a point of reference for the design researcher’s actions and professional development, as a way of evaluating, for example, if the situated processes are leaning towards co-optation by or intermediation within

institutions, or which theories and approaches can contribute to the entanglements of design practices and projects with the grassroots communities and, in this way, stimulate a stronger publics formation. Other than the aforementioned necessity to engage with a proper understanding of the multi-faceted phenomena, any politically engaged project requires an appreciation that PD research is about ways of *changing* the existent – not only understanding it. PD entails dealing with *future things* [36] and the dimension of the future, enlarging the focus on the situated dynamics of PD methods towards embracing an explicit recognition of our actions as part of future-making [55]. This requires a combination of rigorous empirical scholarship to understand the world and practical work to contribute to its responsible transformation [53, 54, 114]. Our analytical framework aims at contributing to this combination from our situated perspective.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have built upon studies on infrastructuring, institutioning, and commoning to elaborate a model supporting what we have learned while collaborating with institutions and grassroots communities. Based on this model, we have referred to previous research and PD cases, to share ‘tales’ from the field that help provide empirical richness to our argument. In illustrating these tales and the multiple relations among institutional actors, designer researchers, and grassroots communities they entail, we contribute an analytical framework that designers can use, for example, in the process of identifying actors and building dialogue and alliances, as well as to assess and balance the interests and goals of different actors, so as to strengthen the emancipatory values of PD projects as a fundamental priority.

We acknowledge that this is far from being a comprehensive account but, building upon institutioning and commoning, we found ourselves lacking the language to describe our position in such processes. Telling tales from our design work has helped us illustrate some of the processes design researchers can experience: the risk of co-optation and the merits of intermediation; the potential formation of publics and the experience of entanglements; as well as the (not-necessarily negative) possibility of rendering ourselves redundant in pursuit of legacy and continuity.

Whilst rich, compelling, and exceeding any classification into representations, the tales of Logan, Macao, and Rimaflow – in the spirit of pluralist views – call for future research that transforms, even dismisses, the ideas we have proposed.

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