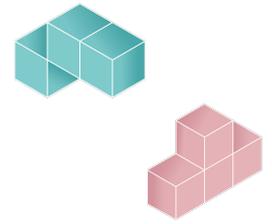


NORDES 2021



DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALK #7.5

DESIGNING *DOWN TO EARTH*: INTRODUCING *RE-WORLDING*

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ABSTRACT

Today's socio-environmental challenges have been made more evident by the current COVID-19 crisis, with implications on various scale levels, intensifying cultural, social, political and environmental questions. Those questions must be addressed in a combined and not distinct way, requiring specific efforts in terms of thinking/acting in designing. In this DESIS Philosophy Talk, we want to explore which of our design competences we need to strengthen in order to create shared worlds that span different scale levels by developing what we call here "*Re-worlding* platforms". It will build on a rich cultural tradition in Participatory Design of bridging people

and groups together, including silent and silenced actors (human and non-human ones). While in the last years some attention has been paid in how to care for the non-human to be part of the political discourse, with the idea of *Re-worlding* we also underline that many silent and silenced human actors still need to be given a voice.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

The COVID-19 crisis we are currently experiencing shows it more clearly than ever: societal challenges on a large scale (vaccination plans, a destabilised climate, the displacement of people and material insecurity) are dividing groups locally and globally, rather than creating solidarity across Europe. French sociologist Bruno Latour (2018) describes this moment of societal division and insecurity as an important juncture, urging us to create shared worlds by: working together;

tackling tangible socio-environmental issues that have implications on various scale levels, in specific locations; and not separating, but combining - in this case - cultural, social, political and environmental questions. Besides than the rich and well documented participatory design discourse in Ant theory (see for instance Storni et al, 2015 and Andersen et al. 2015), who has been exploring the potential of non-human agents for participatory design processes, the Nordic Participatory Design tradition has in the past years been often researching on what a more-than-human design might concretely mean today, and working with questions concerning design and the more-than-human discourse (from Jönsson, 2014 to Lindström & Ståhl, 2019, Veselova 2019 and Westerlaken, 2020). This workshop builds on this conversation and aims to further enrich it by articulating on the idea of *Re-worlding*.

Instead of being the victim of the current polarisation, we build on a rich cultural tradition in Participatory Design of bridging people and groups together. In this DESIS Philosophy Talk, we want to explore which of our design competences we need to strengthen in order to create shared worlds that span different scale levels by developing what we call here *Re-worlding platforms*. This needs clarification of two concepts: *Re-worlding* and *platforms*.

We explore the idea of *Re-worlding*, as a design practice that is focussed on bringing together social, political, cultural and environmental questions. It follows the idea of Bruno Latour to enhance the potential of collectives in the construction of a common world, contributing to a sense of politics *Down to Earth*, being a politics acknowledging the radical interdependency connecting humans and humans with non-human agents. This brings also questions, for instance, on the role “representatives” might have in bringing all points of view on the table - also for instance of silent and silenced actors (human and non-human ones) and questioning also the role of the translator (and balancing matters of power). While in the last years some attention has been paid in how to care for the non-human to be part of the political discourse, with the idea of *Re-worlding* we also underline that many silent and silenced human actors still need to be given a voice, represented, enabled and supported. Latour’s perspective on the needed itinerary *Down to Earth*, that recognizes humans as being just terrestrials amongst others, might help us also to better acknowledge the radical interdependence connecting the environment and the social, recognizing behind environmental issues (such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis) also social ones.

Furthermore, Latour invites us to not be overwhelmed by scale, or to abstract ourselves from what is *Down to Earth*, by starting from our own context, identifying the

radical interdependence within a specific situation (what he calls a *Critical Zone*). It is the act of defining a smaller scale in which to operate to enable all actors, also the silent ones, to have a stake in the public realm, identifying our actions (also, of us as designers) as just one of the many players inter-acting within a given context, a given *Critical Zone*: in other words, as not being an outsider to, but being part of an engendering process (Latour, 2019), that follows other logics than simple production processes. To think design from within this perspective might help us to better shape what design can do in a specific time of polarisation.

What we question is how we can offer people an entry into this critical zone from which a *Re-worlding* practice can be engendered. Here we explore the idea of *platforms* as socio-technical assemblages of [digital] tools, individuals, groups and places that allow people to come together in relation to issues that divide them. In this way we concretise the meaning of *Re-worlding* as a practice of researching and (re)building *platforms* comprising diverse actors (human and non-human), and therefore connecting environmental and social innovation, linked to specific locations and networks and growing caring relationships and inclusive practices, as a way of improving sustainable mechanisms for creating shared worlds.

How can these *platforms* support us to start to plan and construct together the public realm - in other words, a (more-than-human) common world - and how can it support the experience of a deeper understanding of the complexity behind environmental and social issues and of how they inter-depend upon other agents)? In other words; can it enhance the experience what de la Bellacasa (2017) talks about, according to which once you acknowledge the radical interdependence connecting us all, you need to care for it and re-weave the polarisations we are experiencing today?

THE WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

In this DESIS Philosophy Talk, we want to explore how designers can enable this (re)discovery of care and relationality, by making us all experience it. The creation of *Re-worlding platforms* is in our opinion a very concrete first step in connecting us all and making us experience this direction *Down to Earth*. The aim of the talk is to understand how Latour’s and de la Bellacasa’s thinking can give us some indications on designers to concretely act to gather those voices, and to identify some guiding principles for design as politics of the terrestrial. We invite people to reflect on how they create these “*Re-worlding platforms*” in practice.

RE-WORLDING AS AN APPROACH FOR DESIGNING DOWN TO EARTH

In detail, we will thus explore how this philosophical framework might inspire a new approach – called *Re-worlding* - in which to design *platforms* that can bring social and environmental actors (and their agencies) together, in order to act on a larger and more complex level. Do not include other page numbers, headers or footers in your paper submission. Leave these as they appear on this template.

The question that is central is what is necessary to generate a strong ‘ecology’ of *platforms* with the potential to *Re-world*, to reinvent itself by enabling collectives’ working together within and across scales, tackling tangible cultural and socio-environmental issues in specific locations, and not separating, but combining - in this case - social, political and environmental questions.

Our hypothesis is that Participatory Design research offers great potential approaches to further re-create *platforms* in a way that enables them to connect different collectives in tackling socio-environmental challenges. We will propose four different competences the designers should develop to imagine *Re-worlding* as a strategy to bring actors and groups together and explore how these functions and be redefined in a context of *Re-worlding* cultural platforms. The challenge will be that to read them in a non-anthropocentric perspective, in the light of trying to open up for *Re-worlding* PD practices. This might mean to concretely shift those PD competences, re-framing, possibly re-imagining them and opening up the perspective to re-addressing, re-naming them from a more-than-human perspective. In the DESIS Philosophy Talk, we will invite four PD researchers (one for each step) to articulate on how they translate Latour’s and de la Bellacasa’s philosophy into their own *Re-worlding* practices:

1. RE-DISCOVERING THE WORLD

An important approach in creating strong *platforms* for *Re-worlding*, is the participatory design process of trying to surface daily life culture: knowledge about people’s and non-humans’ own ways of being in the world in the contemporary context of unsustainability (Willis, 2006; Winograd and Flores, 1986; Fry, 1999) together with the contemporary context of 'populism' and unsustainability. This requires design research to engage with methods like collective mapping and embedded research in the specific context that *platforms* are engaging with, specifying the *Re-worlding* ambitions of the organisations behind the platforms, documenting the (online/offline) tools that *platforms* use to work on their ambitions, tracing the alliances of between different *platforms* and the trajectory of *platforms* in relation to their ambitions.

Invited lecturers: Cristiano Storni and Mark Marshall, Limerick University

2. RE-CONNECTING

Another possible approach for creating *platforms* for *Re-worlding* is the experience in Participatory Design to develop practical knowledge to shift from engaging with current ways of being in the world (re-discovering) to finding opportunities for people and collectives to connect with each other within and across scales around things they care about (re-connecting) (Escobar, 2018). It is key here to explore the (strategic) alliances that can support the *Re-worlding* ambitions of platforms. This includes for instance exploring the capabilities of identifying opportunities for people and collectives to connect with each other based on what they care for, make these opportunities tangible to allow exchange among potential platform-partners and critically reflect on potential (re-)connections between platform partners in diverse organisational forms.

Invited lecturers: Ann Light and Anna Seravalli (Malmö University), Chiara Basetti (Trento University)

3. RE-IMAGINING

Another very central approach to Participatory Design of *platforms* is tapping into the potential of diverse actors to collectively re-imagining systems, organisations etc. Re-imagination is a way to imagine how diverse collectives can create *platforms* that make “the transition from the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology to a pluriverse of socio-natural configurations; in this context, designs for the pluriverse becomes a tool for reimagining and reconstructing local worlds” (Escobar, 2018). It is key here to reflect on how to re-imagine the organisations’ *Re-worlding* ambitions for their *platforms* - their collective expressions and propositions for organisational forms of care for the world- through collective design action. These actions develop the capabilities of designers to engage with either future needs or marginalized needs for which there is no time nor budget within the current functioning of platforms, by materialising these needs through artefacts: e.g. the creation of digital environments, spatial proposals, alternative mappings, photography, oral (hi)stories, performances, prototypes, scenarios, etc.

Invited lecturers: Seppe De Blust and Freek Persyn (ETH Zurich, Switzerland)

4. RE-INSTITUTIONING

The fourth approach one could hypothesize to integrate the developed *Re-worlding* ambitions (re-connecting) and actions (re-imagining) in the existing organisational structure of *platforms*. This supports sustaining the *Re-worlding platforms* and embedding them within existing

networks and structures. This requires that designers enhance their capabilities to develop a diversity of modes to interact with existing networks, translate abstract *Re-worlding* ambitions in concrete steps and projects (short and long-term actions), hand over the experience and insights of their action research back to the case as well as their partner organisation.

Invited lecturers: Maurizio Teli and Ann-Marie Kanstrup (Aalborg University)

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THE WORKSHOP PRACTICAL OVERVIEW

TITLE

DESIS Philosophy Talk #7.3 Designing down to Earth: introducing *Re-worlding*

DURATION

Half a day

TENTATIVE PROGRAMME

10:00 - 10:30 Welcome & Philosophical positioning and link to design (the organizers)

10:30 - 11:15 Presentation of the four design competences - round of discussants presentations

11:15 - 11:30 Small break

11:30 - 12:15 Four parallel working sessions

12:15 - 12:45 Open interactive discussion and wrap up

THE PROGRAM IN DETAIL

The Talk will open with a position paper/presentation from the Workshop organizers that articulates the organizers' perspective on the matter of the potential of Latour's and De la Bellacasa's philosophies for designing in the Anthropocene, particularly focusing on how their philosophies might inspire a *Re-worlding* approach. After this philosophical framing, the organizers will also personally invite eight Participatory Design researchers (for details, see in the previous section) currently researching on the subject of *Re-worlding*, to articulate as discussants on how they are currently exploring in their own research one of the 4 competences we identified for *Re-worlding*, and how they weave there back Latour's and de la Bellacasa's philosophical insights to participatory design practices. After the discussants' presentations, who will help to weave the philosophical reflections presented in the first part of the Talk back to practice, we will have the hands on session: the discussants will lead four parallel tables (one for each competence), in which they will prototype together toolkits/tools for the competence of *Re-worlding* they addressed in their presentation, discussing it in small groups. Participants are asked to react/interpret/reflect/give feedback to the discussants' proposals, addressing the research question: "Does this competence practically really enable us to go *Down to Earth*? Which is its potential/criticalities?". They will discuss the approaches with the workshop participants, who will bring their own experiences in PD and Design for social innovation on the table and question the approach from within their own experiences/perspectives. At every session the conversation will be mapped, and a series of guidelines

for *Re-worlding* will be developed and shared at the end of the workshop and discussed together in the final open conversation. The guidelines will also be tracked on video, to be shared later on social media (NORDES, DESIS Network, DESIS Philosophy talks). Those guidelines will afterwards be shared in the plenary session with the other NORDES attendees (and possibly also on the conference website/social media). At the end of this second part of the DESIS Philosophy Talk, we will have an open discussion (and a wrap up session moderated by the workshop organizers), highlighting the concrete outcomes of the discussion and the potential value of *Re-worlding* for PD research to come *Back to Earth*. The session will end by asking all the participants to record a small podcast (maximum 3 minutes) providing their own definition of design for *Re-worlding*. These podcasts, together with the videos produced during the parallel sessions, will be shared on the DESIS Network website, DESIS Philosophy Talk website and social media, and can be served as a basis for putting together a proposal for a Design Journal Special Issue on "Re-wording" (to be discussed).

ACCEPTANCE PROCESS AND CRITERIA

A limited number of attendees (max 25 people, registering before the conference), who will sign in through the NORDES 2021 website, will be invited to actively participate in the discussion. The call will be also spread by other channels (such as for instance DESIS Philosophy Talk, DESIS, POLIMI Desis Lab, DESIS social media and to the PhD-Design community and our PhD programmes larger network). We will require interested attendees to sign up and provide their name, role, affiliation, contact and short statement with their motivation to join the workshop session. We will share with them the position paper in advance, to allow a more active participation to the workshop.

PHYSICAL LOCATION / ONLINE FORMAT

If possible, we imagine holding the workshop in a location allowing to work in our parallel groups, thus, please check the number of tables and chairs (+/-30 chairs) available. The space also needs to allow a plenary session (as indicated in the program above).

If the COVID situation will not improve, the format can be easily adapted to an online setting (for instance, via Zoom) and a tech support will be needed by the NORDES organization.

Online format will guarantee data privacy through a closed access participation. A consent form for the use of images and videos will be also submitted to participants.