



CONNECTIVITY

and **CREATIVITY**

in times of **CONFLICT**

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Preface

Connectivity and Creativity in times of Conflict - conference proceedings VI
 Cumulus president's message - Design for Adaptation in Times of Complexity IX

Track 1

Nature positive/design for transformation

Editorial 2
Design methodology
 Scenario-building through a systemic lens: a new perspective on tools and methods to design for sustainability transitions 4
 Intimacy/integrity: a framework for thinking about epistemological styles in design activity 9
 Democratizing design: the development of a 'Design for Do-It-Yourself' framework 15
 The power of imagination: immersive and experiential counterfactuals to engage with sustainability 20
 Applying human-centered system design to the development of a tool for service innovation 25
 Pulse approach: integral design project management to empower transformative processes 30
 Research on design sketch from different disciplines: overview and directions 35
 Researching the invisible: troubling qualitative research design through information architecture 41

Design education

T+ designers: a case for transdisciplinarity in design higher education by way of a South African case study 46
 Materiality, commons, and design education 51
 Representing and shaping regenerative futures: a context-specific approach to art and design education. 58
 Creative strategies for the learning spaces of the future 62
 Implementing SDGs in a product design curriculum, or: the value of tap water 67

Design materialization

Yutaka: how do we prototype the transformative change towards nature positive designs with soil 72
 Material experience: the future of material selection for product design 77
 Discerning modes of design in ecological restoration 82
 From visual to multisensory: how does intangible cultural heritage of traditional costume self-remodel in digital interactive environment? 87
 Designing sustainable furniture: guidelines to promote furniture life cycle design 94

Biophilic approaches in design

Biophilic design for remote studying environments: analysis of case studies involving a collaboration between ergonomics and environmental psychology 98

Bioreceptive interfaces for biophilic urban resilience 103
 Artificial nature: possibilities for mycelial composite material design 109
 Botanical design: exploring the application of parametric plants in furniture 113

Eco-social transitions

Systemic Design Oriented Leadership (SDOL) – a co-created play for eco-social leadership development with the methods of Systems Thinking 118
 Design for transformation: unlock competencies for coping complexity 122
 Change agents: designers interpreting 'the social' and 'social' interpretations of design 127
 The changing role of designers in transition processes 132

Fashion innovations

Fashion design matter: the role of design in guiding a sustainable transformation in Europe 137
 Convincing fashion consumers to go green: a brand communication problem? 142
 Prototype dialogues; re-balancing design thinking through negotiations with fabrics, form and future 148
 Future fashion: new and ancient systems at the intersection of anthropology, ecology and innovation. 152

Urban design & citizen inclusion

Design fiction localised 158
 Transit Oriented Development used to formulate design guidelines for an improved bus network in Malaysia 163
 Exploring sustainable ecosystems in the "15-minute" urban living circle—take Shanghai Urban Space Season 2021 as an example 169
 The Unified Citizen Engagement Approach: a design-oriented framework for involving citizens in the energy transition 174

Design & digitisation

Designing for Viral Infection Awareness through PLAYMUTATION 179
 Gamifying the low impact customer solution design 183
 Connecting to the future; using serious games and scenario development for responsible design 189
 About utopias, apocalypses, respawning and zombies and how understanding images of space and time may inform design for sustainable behaviour 194

Track 2

Digital futures/hybrid reality

Editorial 200
New crafts and craftspeople
 Fashion Craftsmanship 4.0. Learning experience about Industry 4.0 technologies for hybrid digital fashion-tech products, processes, and business model design 202
 Crafting hybrid workflows for the design of augmented textile artefacts 210

Distance: digital immersive technologies and craft engagement	214	Fantastical reality: designing virtual urban space through extended reality	333
Notions of hybrid craft production: conversations and small-scale experiments in digital fabrication	219	The Metapolis – cities between a ripple and a blur	338
Research through design in the cyber-physical era		Towards data activation and engagement within a smart city	345
Digital synesthesia in product design. Building a vocabulary of physical interactions for a sensible quantified self	223	Technology driven design education	
Digital content that offers experience of listening to crystallized music	228	Teaching design of technologies for collaborative interaction - an emerging pedagogical framework	349
The body can not be thought: the 'disabled body' as a catalyst to develop new paradigms for human-computer integration.	232	A mixed-method approach: virtual reality to co-create future higher education workspaces in a post COVID-19 academic environment	357
Metaphysical Instruments: prototypes for hybrid and live music-making	236	An attempt to integrate AI-based techniques into first year design representation course	363
Redefining the role of design(ers)		Digital fashion	
Virtual skin: co-creating 3D materials with synesthetic artificial intelligence	241	The emperor is naked: deconstructed materiality in fashion NFTs	368
Cabinets of curiosities for the postcolony II: tokens: collections I-V	245	Dematerializing fashion- improving design-led sustainable and hybrid retail experiences via digital twins	372
Speculating futures in an age of nostalgia	250	Fashion archive as a meta medium: unfolding design knowledge through media technologies	379
Computational thinking in design and fabrication for augmented and accessible museums.	254	Fashion and the metaverse: from omni-channel to direct-to-avatar	384
Usability and performance of innovations		Track 3	
Usability and UX evaluation of an online interactive virtual learning environment: a case study of Wales' Virtual Hospital	260	Handle with care/inclusivity	
Design perspectives for the future of work in Industry 5.0 environment: the digital and physical space in Augmented Reality uses	266	Editorial	
Assessing the impact of immersive versus desktop virtual reality shopping experiences in the fashion industry metaverse	271	Design for/as communication	
A pilot study with the Shaper Origin to determine the learning curve of augmented fabrication	276	Encouraging humanitarian assistance in conflict zones through animated public service announcements	392
Design for and with extended reality		The design of an engaging focus group discussion toolkit involving school-aged children following urotherapy	397
Introducing the material experience concept in the metaverse and in virtual environments	280	Inclusive Transformation of age-friendly communities based on digital technology support	402
Balancing authenticity and creativity: A VR system design for assisting in ceramic creation.	287	Taking care of the elderly through the tools of the animated communication design: a useful and ethical imperative	408
What is the furniture in the Metaverse for?	292	Pee poo period. Exploring the intersection between shame, bodily fluids, and sustainable design	413
Design for and with digital fabrication		Design for diverse users	
Craft in the age of robots	299	Feminist value sensitive design of self-tracking technology based on female body data	419
Light it up: designing electronic textile with a light as a design material	304	Spatial "mutual altruism" as a relationship of care for homeless people. How design impacts social re-integration	425
Strategy for knowledge transfer in AM as a hybrid process chain towards a transition from prototyping to commercialisation	309	I'll be there for you: exploring a sense of belonging to enhance student engagement	429
Speculative tinkering on circular design materials through 3D printing	317	Inclusive design in the context of performative gender through product form	433
Flaws as features, new perspectives for developing an additive manufacturing design language	322	Landing the internship: the role of gender in finding ID internships	438
The digital on urban scale		Object as the tool of recovery - Examining material culture of young refugees in Hungary for trauma processing	443
Designing smart product-service systems for smart cities with 5G technology: the Polaris case study	328	The food delivery industry and its lack of care in gender equality: the speculative case of 'GiGi'	448
		Winning at more than a game! A storytelling board game concept to raise awareness about refugees' language barriers	455

Care(ful) spaces

Cities for all: co-design interventions on urban features using inclusive technology	461
Separating Covid from non-covid: spatial adaptations in existing hospital buildings	466
Wayfinding is caring	471
Explore vacant public spaces regeneration to facilitate minor's activities and education under inclusive design principles	475
Human-space relationships as narrative processes for inclusivity	480
Urban darkness: human experience of atmosphere and fear	485
Daily social interactions of hawkers as a catalyst to actuating bottom-up spatial justice: experience from Hong Kong	489
The city of care through walkability and proximity. Researching on and with Generation Alpha on urban walkability assessment	494
Hinges, passages and comfort	499
Renewal of urban ecological transportation network based on inclusivity design — Take Sydney's "Livable Green Network" plan as an example	504
How to take care of the Antwerp modernist social housing of Alfons Francken? And how do this housing blocks take care of its changing population?	510
Inclusive innovation: a study of creative furniture design for urban community public space	515

Co-creating care(ful) design

Health, care and prosthetics: co-design methodologies in the case of autofabricantes	519
See the unseen: a co-creation design process for children with incarcerated parents	524
The power of photovoice: AI support provides voicing opportunities for children in sex education	529
Co-design for the common good: a holistic approach to workspace projects	533
Co-designing neighbourhood identities. How to share memories and experiences towards a common sense of belonging	538

Design(ers) & learning

Universal design for learning as an inclusive teaching methodology for an African art and culture course in Ghana	544
Material-led thinking as a practice of care: a strategy from art and design education	550
Artful care for self and others in daily design practice	555
Material metaphors: method for physicalising relations and experiences	560

Design ethos

A South African approach towards a caring design practice	565
Weighing the tensions of nostalgia, necessity, and care in contemplating the future of the Nigerian design-scape	570
Food as a form of care: designing social innovative processes and practices	575

Designing with posthuman kinship: from posthuman theory to human-non human collaborative design approaches	580
Beyond empathy: how curiosity leads to greater care	585

Inclusive approaches to intangible cultural heritage

Convention versus contemporaneity: the affordances of design-led mediation towards sustaining an ancestral cycle of linen making in Castelões, Portugal	590
Combining care for planet, people and culture towards circularity	594
Media art creation process using digitized archetype of Korean traditional dance movement	600
Envisioning design strategies for intangible cultural heritage activation	604

Sustaining traditional crafts and techniques

Craft for care, design for life. Heritage contemporary enhancement and communication design tools as a resource for social changes, fostering diversity and inclusion	610
Embroidered heritage: a design-led visual ethnography of traditional Palestinian motifs	615

Adaptation of the built environment

Design for Ukraine's heritage: engaging international students during times of war through design activism	619
The technical compatibility of vertical greening with built heritage	624
New design models for proximity retail and senior inclusion	628
Investigating spatial patterns of green infrastructure at built heritage sites in Antwerp, Belgium	632
From architecture to community: adaptive reuse as social practice	636

Participation and role of communities

Methodology and evaluation of digital assets reconstruction of cultural heritage with visitor participation in museum	642
Community heritage: an immersive approach to disaster resilience	646
Caring for human diversity and built heritage through design: a multiple case study enquiry	651

Poster abstracts

Adding value to the future through design and entrepreneurship: PLACE	657
A video game for emotion regulation of medical students	658
Video game design for ecological impacts	659
Dwell and move, change ensues	660
Transposing timelines	661
Artificial intelligence-aided type design for Chinese script	662
Design and reconstruction of the new interest youth community in china in the post-epidemic era	663
Sound E-scape: an interactive, digital application for music therapy and soundscape generation	664
Development of existing biophilic interior design definition	665

Design-driven approaches to human augmentation. An exploratory study	666	Human augmentation: the role of design in the design of on-body interfaces for cognitive-sensorial wellbeing	718
Designing with people: creating a multi-level interdisciplinary design education environment for more inclusion	667	A conception toward design narratives for innovation	721
Material connotations: meta-structure research of practice based projects with invasive species plant waste	668	Home away from home – The role of design methods in processing trauma of forced migration and loss of place	725
From collecting natural objects to presenting the future anthropocene: exhibition design for the anthropocene theme in museums	669	Decoloniality and healing: confronting inter-generational trauma/ideologies through architectural preservation and education	728
Catacombs: refuge on the border of the virtual and the real	670	The ephemerality of an organic material and its implications: a context specific study with invasive exotic species (Japanese knotweed) waste in Genk, Belgium	731
Hybrid specimens: Phygital artefacts at the intersection of analogue + digital crafts	671	Visual communication bridging intercultural barriers	734
Content management system in mapping movable objects	672	Feeling the future car: designing for driving pleasure in the era of co-driving	737
FlavourGame: interaction design in hybrid games	673	Mediterranean landscapes in emergency: nature and culture	739
Bibliometrics in circular design visual representation	674	Key Performance Indicators for measuring and evaluating users' sensory perceptions and behaviors in learning spaces in higher design education	742
Inclusivity as a hype phenomenon in advertising	675	Textile handcraft making and women creators' psychological well-being: a narrative review	746
Inclusion in recruiting	676	Cross-case analysis on the integration of extended reality (XR) with the design and planning of the built environment	750
Values, design and educational project: contemporary projections	677	Ecosystem services: an interpretive paradigm of urban and territorial heritage. Strategies, guidelines, and vision for sustainable cities	754
Project Hope : the creative revolution mural, a human singularity approach	678	Characteristic analysis of future-oriented design based on cognitive context theory	757
More-than-human ways of thinking through felting wool	679	Digital wellbeing and design	760
"Care strategies to strengthen heritage structures as a community asset during the pandemic: the case of Bahay Nakpil-Bautista"	680	Appropriation and appreciation of Austrian and Indonesian puppetry	763
A novel offloading insole system designed for healthcare	681	Reinventing the gastronomic experience: using interactive digital environments to raise awareness of food-related cultural heritage	766
Towards an embodied expression of pandemic nodes & networks in the age of social distancing	682	Developing cultural heritage sustainability from the perspective of participatory sentimental souvenir design	770
Cumulus Phd network	683	How does design intervention promote sustainable rural transition: an analytical framework based on the multi-level perspective model	774
Evolution of 'Mashrabiya' in the Middle East & North Africa - traditional wood carving technique revival	684	Designing future hybrid creative space using digital tools in educational institutions and organizations	777
Exploring the potential of material innovation to revitalize traditional crafts in Egypt	687		
An overview of design suggestions for contemporary theatrical VR productions	690	Reviewers	781
Polymath interpolation in transdisciplinary open-ended design – design for conservation	693		
Implementation of design culture as a strategic innovation through design-oriented industrial conversion and product diversification	696		
Sustainable transformation of age-friendly community centres based on transition design	700		
Parametric Joinery. Development of a system of configurable joints	704		
Designing a ward inventory for a sustainable healthcare. Framework for healthcare providers of configurations among disposable medical devices, clinical procedures, and medical equipment in the neonatology department.	707		
A safe space of creativity-designing with vulnerable female communities	711		
The direction of wayfinding. From the identification of a place to the expression of its meaning.	715		

The development of a more walkable urban environment is aligned with the notion of proximity. Jane Jacobs (1961) was one of the first urban planners who emphasized the importance of neighborhood proximity and the activism it can generate. She considered cities as dynamic and complex ecosystems, observing them in their infrastructural details and paying attention to sidewalks, parks, urban furniture, etc., as opposed to car-centered design. A first attempt on constructing this intersection between proximity and walkability was made in a paper presented at the RSD2022 conference, where a new concept of Systemic Proximity was introduced not only from the functional and spatial perspectives, but also the relational one, systematizing its domains with Quintuple Helix spheres (Sedini et al., 2022). Speck (2013) has presented the importance of developing the city for pedestrians and walking activity, which requires infrastructure development, network connectivity, a high land-use mix, vitality, and distinction of urban character. He identified four main walkability assessment criteria: *usefulness*, *comfort*, *safety*, and *attractiveness* (Speck, 2013). Safety is the key barrier to walking activities that includes issues like crime and traffic (Forsyth, 2015), which is defined not only by the infrastructure and built environment but also by the perceptions of safety. Besides functional factors, Van Cauwenberg et al. (2018) observed a positive association between walkability and aesthetically pleasing scenery with leisure time walking, emphasizing the necessity of considering "attractiveness". The analysis and assessment elements and methods of walkability and proximity have mainly focused on measuring through the use of assessment tools such as GIS analysis, space syntax, observations, sensors, and digital apps (Aerts, 2018, Blečić et al., 2015, Gorrini and Bandini, 2018, & Peyton, 2019) to evaluate the so-called location-based data, mainly related to infrastructural characteristics. While guides and in-depth studies addressing proximity and walkability from the people's (human) perspective (Marquet & Miralles-Guasch, 2015), individual-based data, are still lacking.

Children and walkability

A loud recall for humanity and a higher quality of life for all has been reawakened in every city worldwide (Sedini et al., 2022). Lefebvre (1968) defines the concept of 'the right to the city' as the phenomena that entail the social relations, functions, services, practicability of the urban public space, and its mission to fulfill the instances of all city users (Annunziata & Garau, 2018). It is extensively established that walkability contributes to the physical and mental health (Rundle et al., 2016; Todd et al., 2016; Zuniga-Teran et al., 2016) of people, regardless of age group; it also contributes to the quality of life and social inclusion of citizens that can develop a sense of belonging and ownership (Gorrini, 2021; Speck, 2013). Children's walkability is still not widely explored and consolidated because of their great complexity (as a group) and diversity of needs, especially given the limited available data (Gorrini, 2021).

The ability to walk freely and safely significantly benefits children's healthy and conscious growth as it involves experiences and practices that foster independence and autonomy (Shaw et al., 2015). Play is a fundamental activity of exploration and learning for children, deeply affected by the relationships between young citizens and urban areas (Annunziata & Garau, 2018). Furthermore, children's enjoyment of urban spaces allows them to observe and practice adult behavioral patterns, thus experiencing social constructions and developing inter-

personal skills while gradually and individually defining their personas by contributing to society as future adult citizens (Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2004). This is where the many strategies and tools for assessing walkability come into play, tending to focus on the spatial dimension (Annunziata & Garau, 1980) and universal design indicators (Steinfeld, 2011). Instead, the perceived level of walkability is greatly influenced by the characteristics of individual walkers (Gorrini, 2021).

The children's engagement in city-making discourses is often guided by organizing co-design and co-creation laboratories within urban regeneration programs. These workshops witness the realization of a child's project, vision, or desire using recycled materials, prototyping, or a two/three-dimensional physical artefact (Pierandrei & Marengoni, 2017). As shown in various national and international projects and initiatives, such as *Walking the city at 95cm high* (2018), *Designing Streets for Kids* (2020), *UrbEX* (2022), a moment of exploration and investigation at the start of the workshop can be conducted, asking and instructing kids to take photographs, sketch, and take notes on what they see, like or dislike, all of which is then used to assist them in creating a concept for the identified purposes.

Research methodology

The main research question we have tried to answer is how young children perceive the concept of walkability in urban contexts. How could the experience of their active participation in the walkability assessment provide potential indications and guides to city development towards proximity?

The pilot experience presented in this paper was conducted during the Sustainability Development Festival 2022. The proposed initiative involved the Alpha generation (born after 2012) - a class of students from the secondary school of the Istituto Comprensivo Giusti d'Assisi. The research was led by a research group of the department of design of Politecnico di Milano in collaboration with the Junior design lab of PACO Design and ADI Design Museum. The team of facilitators and moderators was composed of design researchers and educators. The chosen neighborhood was in the "Sarpi" area, located in Municipality 8 of Milano (Italy). The activity lasted about 4 hours, from the beginning of the school day until lunchtime. It was developed in three macro steps, with three different and specific objectives and locations:

1. At **school**: researchers shared with the class (21 students) the agenda and the key concepts of walkability and proximity. After the first moment of knowledge sharing, awareness raising and ice-breaking, each student was given a booklet, a pen, and a badge. The first task of the booklet was individual and aimed at collecting the personal data about their knowledge on the neighborhood and their mobility habits.
2. In the **neighborhood**: the class left the school and started exploring, observing, and collecting data in the neighborhood and assessing proximity through the walkability factors. The walk was organized along two paths (A and B). Students were divided into two macro groups and then micro-groups of three members to collect data, which explored 6 pitstops distributed along the two routes (starting from the school and ending at the ADI Design Museum).
3. In the **museum**: once at the ADI Design Museum, the class was hosted in the Junior Lab spaces, managed

and curated by PACO Collaborative. This activity was about creating a story using a specific template that allowed the micro-groups to present what they had learned. The story was developed in both text and a collage, using three photos of the various pitstops explored by the micro-groups. The images used for the collage are prepared by researchers to support the creation of the collage. This activity aimed to reflect on what had been explored and share an initial evaluation of the neighborhood's walkability. Finally, a short collective plenary presentation by each group took place.

At the end of the activity, students left with a questionnaire to answer anonymously, which was then collected by the educators and were returned to the research team after a week.

Research tool design and data collection

In addition to presenting six tasks (one for each pitstop to journey A or B), a paper booklet with a special cardboard cover was designed to involve students playing an active and leading role in the research and observation activities (Sander & Sappers, 2008). Each page in the booklet provides specific tasks to guide students' observation activities. Besides, the cover is designed as a frame that works as a photographic frame, which could be used by the students to individually choose what to photograph with the help of the researchers and facilitators (Fig. 2). The frame enables students to show their own points of view and decide what they want to take and collect.



Figure 2. Some photos showing the booklet used by students: the cover (left) and examples of specific guides and tasks that students need to carry out (right).

Moreover, the tasks were quantitative and qualitative questions, specially alternated and based on proximity through the walkability factors. The questions, always placed on the right-hand page, were accompanied by a display of the overall map, pitstop reference point, and the walkability factors related to it (Fig. 2). The template used for the stories, on the other hand, was structured to provide space for text and space for collages (Fig. 3). There were to be three collages, using as a background, a realistic photograph of three of the six pitstops explored during the second macro phase of the pilot. The story was to be about a peer's walkability experience and was realized through a co-creation session by each micro group at the ADI Design Museum.

The research team collected all artifacts used and produced by the students for analysis purposes. These artifacts are both analog and digital. The analog data include those from the questionnaires (pre and post-experiment ones), the contents of the observation and evaluation carried out by the students, and the stories at both textual and figurative levels (the collages) in the last phase (Fig. 3). The digital data mainly includes the photos and videos taken to represent the students' points of view. The analog one was then transferred digitally by scanning and using a form to structure a helpful worksheet to triangulate the data analysis and insights that emerged.



Figure 3. Template (left) used for the creation of the neighborhood story in the last phase and an example of the filled tool with photos and stories (right)

Data analysis

The data analysis has been conducted by integrating digital and analog data triangulation. In this paper, we present the first results of data analysis; the authors mainly explored and generated answers to the research questions regarding walkability and civic engagement methodologies. For further investigation, the stories and collages will be analyzed by involving external psychology, education, and GIS experts. Therefore, to answer the research questions stated above, the analysis results thus were clustered into two main categories, the first one deal with the thematic content/topic of the research, children's perception and perspectives on the neighborhood's walkability and proximity, and the second one exam the research methodology itself.

Regarding the former, information extracted from questionnaires and booklets that present the children's perspectives has shown some differences from the literature and practices related to urban planning and regeneration. The walkability factors have often been seen as well-defined, clearly categorized, and distinct from one to another. However, the young children who participated in this pilot showed that the walkability factors (such as usefulness, comfort, safety, attractiveness, legibility, and population) could be correlated and overlapped above all. In other words, the students considered the factors together and not individually, creating relationships and even correlations by citing actions and actors. For example, following this reasoning, it is helpful to quote one of the many answers in response to the question "what is the most important walkability factor for you?" which is "the most important factor of walkability, in my opinion, is usefulness - utility for the simple reason of usefulness = convenience = safety". Another peculiarity that emerged concerning the factors of walkability is the correlation and thus the order or rather the systemization of the six different factors. Here we quote another answer to the same question mentioned above: "because attractiveness makes the population build the need for safety, comfort and work hence usefulness". It is worth noting how much the humanistic aspect of these responses related to the walkability assessment factors is present. And all these bottom-up perspectives and humanistic interpretations have been discussed very little in planning and building urban environments. Finally, another element that emerged is the importance of the sensoriality of urban spaces. The 15-minute city is based on the principle of chrono-urbanism, which sees the quality of life based on short and easy spatial-temporal accessibility. From the explorative experience, an emotional and relational dimension to the place could be observed by integrating data collected from the questionnaire and relevant questions in the booklet. This result indicates the potential studies on including a human perspective in the definition of walkability parameters and the assessment factors, and the role citizens could play in proposing different approaches to evaluate walkability.

Regarding the second cluster of results, the one concerning methodology, what emerged, in particular, is the great potential for capacity building and awareness raising that this type of activity can enable and empower. Indeed, answers to the question *"Did you enjoy today's activity? Why?"* such as *"I never notice the important things, so it helps me a lot"*, *"I had much fun [...] I noticed things I would never have seen"* and yet *"because it teaches me useful things in everyday life, and it is also very fun and interesting"*. Civic engagement linked to walkability experiences that consider participants as co-researchers trigger virtuous circles of capacity building and awareness raising that thus contribute to healthy growth as (future) adult citizens. It is, therefore, a question of empowerment, not by chance that it has been verified how answers questionnaire at the beginning of the experience, *"I know the neighborhood"*, at the end of the experience *"it was useful for me to notice things"*. The results of this pilot experience also reveal this kind of citizen engagement actions could set up strategies to articulate the needs of "overlooked" vulnerable targets, who may have diverse preferences and needs regarding amenity accessibility (La Rosa et al., 2018 in Weng et al., 2019).

Discussion

The analysis of research results brings further reflections and indications on how our cities could provide more care:

Firstly, including citizens' perspectives in city-making is more than involving them in co-research, co-creation, and co-design workshops. Participatory design is an effective way to embrace the users' perspectives in the solution-making process, especially for challenges and problems that are complex, ill-defined, and contextualized. However, not everyone has the capacity and knowledge to be able to actively provide their contributions. People have the right to user participation in design only if effective policies make people truly capable of design (Dong, 2008). Especially when facing vulnerable targets, who might have fewer possibilities to participate. From this research activity, we understood that the first phase of warm-up, the presentation on the concept of walkability and proximity, and the guided observation in the neighborhood had played a crucial role in making participants fully prepared for the last co-creation activity. Designers and design researchers should not only work on proving the accesses and occasions

to engage participants in the conversations and design actions, but they should not ignore the necessity to equip the citizens with sufficient background knowledge and easy-to-act methods and tools, as well as concrete and unique personal experiences in which they feel comfortable and confident to make their suggestions and proposals. Therefore, we emphasize the co-research activity as important as the co-design/co-creation in the civic citizen engagement area.

Secondly, design and research interventions could activate new ways to collaborate and interact among stakeholders in the urban territory. The proximity concept promotes the mix-use and multi-functionality in the city, which will eventually facilitate new relationships, connections, and interactions that didn't exist before. However, this objective is difficult to reach without the participation and engagement of citizens and residents, who physically move in the neighborhood among different places and locations. For instance, the middle school and ADI design museum are physically quite close to each other; however, before participating in the research project, they have never had the chance to know each other, not even mention to collaborate. Both during and after this research project, we have seen and heard about the interest from both sides to continue the possibilities to collaborate on relevant activities and events. Moreover, middle school students have expressed great interest in coming back to learn better about the design museum and explore interesting events to participate in. The feedback and results demonstrate that the Quintuple Helix (eco)system of relationship (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010) could be activated and initiated by citizens' engagement in city-making and city-researching, at the same time, these actions foster the implementation of 15-minute city concept, which will eventually provide more effective care to citizens and residents.

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This book contains academic papers and posters of the Cumulus Antwerp conference, held in Antwerp on 12-15 April 2023. The Cumulus community, designers, artists, and educators were invited to submit contributions on how culture and creative industry can offer resilience, consolation, and innovation models on human scale, in line with the conference theme 'Connectivity and Creativity in times of Conflict'.

The contributions were double blind reviewed in the tracks

- 1) Nature positive/Design for transformation,
- 2) Digital futures/Hybrid reality,
- 3) Handle with care/Inclusivity, and
- 4) PhD network.

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