

University, Gender, and Sustainability: Design as a Practice of Resistance and Belonging

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a critical analysis of the institutional crisis in universities facing the Anthropocene, based on the trajectory of a student enrolled in STEM programs who, after failing to find sustainable conditions for permanence, migrates to the field of design. Personal experience is used as a critical method to expose the social unsustainability of academic environments structured around paradigms of exclusion. Guided by intersectional and decolonial perspectives, the research articulates gender, sustainability, and political design, arguing that the permanence of dissident bodies in higher education constitutes a vital indicator of social sustainability.

Keywords: Gender, Higher Education, Political Design, Social Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Universities, often idealized as neutral and meritocratic spaces, are also silent sites of unacknowledged collapse. Although the notion of university sustainability appears in institutional policies, it is frequently reduced to its ecological and economic dimensions, neglecting social sustainability, that is, the concrete conditions of permanence, inclusion, and well-being of those who inhabit these spaces. For Manzini (2008), thinking about sustainability requires considering living systems and their interdependent relationships, including the social networks that make collective life possible.

This neglect becomes even more alarming when we look at the data. According to a study by Franco and Puglia (2023), at least six out of ten female students of universities in Latin America report having experienced some form of violence during their academic trajectories. These findings reveal that permanence is not merely a matter of scholarships or calls for funding, but a daily struggle against symbolic, institutional, and interpersonal violence that crosses dissident and minoritized bodies.

This article emerges from a critical analysis of an academic trajectory that moves through STEM programs and culminates in the field of design. It is important to note that this text does not constitute a traditional case study, but rather a critical literature review grounded in a situated authorial narrative. Experience is mobilized here as a tool for structural reading: a symptom of the dynamics of exclusion and unsustainability that permeate contemporary higher education.

Moving across different fields of knowledge exposes not only the rigidity of certain epistemologies, but also the subtle, and not so subtle, mechanisms through which bodies that do not conform to normative standards are expelled. As Flesler, Neidhardt, and Ober (2021)

argue, feminist pedagogy in design does not rely on ready-made formulas, but on the ability to sustain discomfort and open spaces for difference.

Within this context, the migration from the technological sciences to design is understood as a political gesture, both a forced choice and an insurgent one, made in response to the impossibility of remaining in environments where difference is systematically silenced or punished. In many STEM programs (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), the presence of women and gender dissidents is still marked by isolation, harassment, discrimination, and the constant delegitimization of their abilities. Historically shaped by patriarchal and meritocratic logics, these spaces often operate through symbolic exclusion, erasing forms of knowledge that do not align with the dominant technical-rational paradigm.

Design, traditionally viewed as an aesthetic or functional practice, is approached here as a technology of care and resistance, as proposed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). In times of multiple collapses, environmental, social, and epistemological, rethinking university sustainability requires shifting the focus from mere institutional preservation toward the creation of effective conditions for plural existence. It is not only about guaranteeing access, but about cultivating permanence with dignity.

Drawing on the authors' experiences within the Gender Hubs project: Laboratories for Monitoring, Analysis and Prototyping of University Policies for Gender Equity through Design (research project approved under the CNPq Universal Call 2023), this discussion intertwines the self-reflection of one of the authors with theoretical discussions developed within the NIDA research group (Narrativas em Inovação, Design e Antropologia) at UFMA. These debates take place in the context of feminist teaching practices grounded in the concept of prototyping institutional gender policies.

Thus, this article positions itself as both an act of refusal and a gesture of proposition: a refusal of normalized unsustainability, and a proposal of worlds yet to come, worlds in which all forms of existence can remain, resist, and flourish. Inspired by Donna Haraway (2023), this writing embraces the task of “staying with the trouble”, inhabiting zones of tension as fertile spaces for political creation. Prototyping permanence, in this sense, is also a way of prototyping possible futures.

1. SUSTAINABILITY AND CARE AS POLITICAL PRACTICES

Thinking about university sustainability from a gendered, intersectional, and decolonial perspective requires confronting the foundational bases of modern higher education and its logics of exclusion. bell hooks (1994) reminds us that education is not a neutral field; it is a political territory in which social hierarchies are either reproduced or contested. By approaching the classroom as a space of radical possibility, hooks proposes an engaged pedagogy that values lived experience, especially that of Black women, as legitimate knowledge. This point of departure allows us to understand how universities continue to operate through structures that silence, violate, and exclude.

In contemporary debates on global crises and their roots, Donna Haraway (2023), by naming our era the Capitalocene, shifts responsibility for ecological and social devastation away from the abstract figure of “humanity” and toward concrete historical systems: capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Haraway invites us to stay with the trouble, that is, to refuse quick

fixes and to confront the complexities of the present through tentacular thinking, care, and relational responsibility.

In dialogue with this perspective, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2014) explore the imminence of civilizational collapse as a crisis of political imagination. The question “what world does the university help sustain?” emerges with urgency. When dissident bodies are systematically expelled through burnout, symbolic violence, racism, LGBTphobia, or institutional misogyny, there can be no sustainability, neither social nor epistemological. This is, therefore, a design problem: what are we designing when we design higher education?

It is at this point that design, as an epistemic field, gains particular relevance. Arturo Escobar (2016) proposes a radical shift in design practice, from design as problem-solving to an ontological design. This move entails not merely designing solutions, but reimagining modes of existence themselves, recognizing the interdependence among knowledges, territories, and bodies.

Ezio Manzini (2008) argues that there can be no environmental sustainability without social sustainability. Sustainable systems, for him, are those that embrace the complexity of human relations and promote equity. This perspective expands sustainability beyond technical or ecological metrics, bringing it closer to an ethical-political commitment to social justice.

Along similar lines, Maya Ober (2022) reminds us that design has historically been, and continues to be, shaped by patriarchal and Eurocentric structures. For the author, practicing feminist design means deconstructing project neutrality and embracing the discomfort of working from the margins. This entails acknowledging that design, when mobilized as a tool for social critique, is also an instrument of dissidence.

In this same insurgent spirit, Noronha (2025) emphasizes the need to challenge dominant methodologies through a situated listening to women’s knowledge and practices. By articulating artisanal practices with decolonial approaches to design, the author exposes how patriarchal and capitalist structures devalue feminine, racialized, and territorial forms of knowledge, and argues that only through critical and collaborative methodologies is it possible to sustain processes of autonomy and belonging.

We add to this debate the contribution of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who introduces the notion of care as an epistemological practice. For the author, care is not merely an affective gesture, but an act of world maintenance. Incorporating care as an analytical and ethical category in higher education means recognizing that student permanence, especially among those most vulnerable, depends on networks of support, listening, material conditions, and time.

In a similar vein, Silvia Franco and Maximiliano Puglia (2023) demonstrate how institutional violence, emotional neglect, and symbolic harassment are structural causes of university dropout, particularly among students from minoritized groups. Their study reveals that permanence is more than an economic issue; it is a matter of ontological security.

Finally, the proposal advanced by Suvi Pihkala and Helena Karasti (2016) expands the field of participatory design by advocating for reflective and situated engagement. Rather than importing solutions, their approach emphasizes co-constructing practices based on what emerges locally: affects, histories, and knowledge. This allows design to be not only reactive, but also propositional, opening space for alternative and insurgent imaginaries within the university.

This theoretical framework thus supports an interdisciplinary approach that brings together feminism, decoloniality, political ecology, and critical design. By recognizing design as a technology of care and world-making, and by understanding higher education as a political space under dispute, this work proposes dissident permanence as a form of radical sustainability or, in Haraway's words, as a commitment to what may still come to be.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research adopts a qualitative and critical approach, guided by the practice of engaged reflexivity as proposed by Pihkala and Karasti (2016). The academic experience of the first author, shaped by trajectories through STEM programs and a subsequent migration to design, is mobilized as an analytical field for examining dynamics of structural exclusion in higher education. This analysis is articulated with participation in the Gender Hubs project, linked to the NIDA research group at UFMA, particularly through activities developed within a graphic design course focused on socially engaged practices.

The method combines autobiographical narratives with situated critical reflection, understanding personal accounts not as isolated testimony, but as knowledge production rooted in historical and political contexts. The research acknowledges the researcher's involvement as an active part of the relations it describes, treating lived experience as a constitutive and transformative element of the investigative practice.

The empirical dimension of this research is grounded in the activities developed within the Graphic Design I class at UFMA, taught by the second author. The course was structured around the theme of design and gender, with the goal of producing graphic artifacts addressing gender-based violence in higher education. In order to ground the design process in the lived realities of the campus, students were invited to conduct listening practices across six buildings at UFMA's Campus do Bacanga before developing their visual pieces. The buildings were selected for the activity, with the groups distributed among them. This process, in which listening to those who inhabit a space preceded and informed the design decisions, enacts a relational understanding of design, one in which the first gesture is not to project, but to hear.

The subjective, theoretical, and practical narratives that follow, presented as the article's reflective core, draw on personal memories and bibliographic studies in the fields of political design, social sustainability, gender studies, and decolonial theory.

Within the context of the VII Seminar of NIDA, organized as part of a methodological stage of the Gender Hubs project, political design was discussed as a means of confronting colonial structures and as a force for imagining other possible worlds. Topics addressed included new economies, the world of work, intersectionalities, and cosmopolitics. These experiences are complemented by the project's research actions, one of which seeks to identify issues related to the permanence of women and trans students on the campus of UFMA.

3. DESIGN AS A SPACE OF RESISTANCE

The transition to design was not merely a change of academic program, but an entry into a distinct ecology of practices, different kinds of knowledge and ways of being. After years spent in environments where normativity was the rule and subjectivity was disposable, it was within critical and feminist approaches to design that I found a possible territory for breathing

and reconfiguration. What was at stake was not simply an “academic identity,” but the reconstruction of an existence in ruins, a form of permanence understood not as mere survival, but as the reinvention of living.

In design, I encountered other languages. Where there had previously been only calculation, performance, and abstraction, I found materiality, imagination, and collaboration. The sensitive dimension of design disrupted the aridity of the STEM areas. This is not to romanticize the field, design also carries colonial, patriarchal, and exclusionary legacies, but rather to recognize on it a fissure and an opportunity for re-existence.

Design practice, especially when informed by feminist, decolonial, and eco-affective epistemologies, opens space for subjectivities silenced in other contexts. As Flesler, Neidhardt, and Ober (2021) argue, feminist pedagogy in design is not limited to adding “diversity” to curricula, but enacts an ethical and political shift in the ways of teaching, learning, and creating.

This shift is radical because it proposes care as a method. Here, care is not an appendix; it is epistemological infrastructure. As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) maintains, care is simultaneously a practice, an ethics, and an ontology. It shapes how we know, relate, and create worlds. Thinking of design as a technology of care displaces its classical function of problem-solving toward a relational function: sustaining lives.

For this reason, we argue that design, when practiced from these perspectives, operates as an institutional counter-technology. If the hegemonic university reproduces epistemes of control, scarcity, and competitiveness, counter-hegemonic design invents spaces of affective abundance, shared creation, and the revaluation of experience. As Escobar (2016) proposes, to think of design as a tool for transition is to design worlds in which different forms of life can coexist.

This approach resonates with Haraway’s (2023) critique: it is not about “saving” or “fixing” the system, but about creating zones of contact in which we can weave sustainable relations with the concrete conditions of our existence. Design here does not seek to erase conflict, but to inhabit it responsibly, as a tentacular practice that entangles affects, politics, and materialities.

Finally, this section advances an important shift: permanence should not be understood simply as resistance to exclusion, but as the continuous invention of ways of being that escape the logics of productivity and normativity. To remain, in this context, is to create. It is to design worlds in which we can belong. And this, in itself, is an act of profound political insurgency.

4. UNIVERSITIES AND POSSIBLE DESIGNS

The notion of permanence is often treated as a given condition: those who want to stay, stay; those who leave were simply “not strong enough.” At the Universidade Federal do Maranhão (UFMA), this logic is reflected in the very motto inscribed on the institution’s coat of arms: “*A vida é combate*” (Life is battle), an allusion to *Canção do Tamoio* by the poet Gonçalves Dias. The epic narrative of the hero and the battle is thus evoked in the institution’s tangible representation, its visual identity.

Yet this meritocratic logic functions as a smokescreen that conceals structural mechanisms of exclusion. Permanence, especially for gender dissidences, is not a matter of willpower, but a

constant negotiation with systems that are often organized to expel whatever escapes the norm. As Franco and Puglia (2023) argue that symbolic, institutional, and everyday violence against university students in Latin America operates silently, undermining mental health, eroding bonds, and interrupting trajectories.

In light of this, it is urgent to shift the question. Instead of asking “why don’t they stay?”, we must ask “who has the right to remain, and under what conditions?”. Permanence is not neutral: it is selective, racialized, gendered, and classed. It is therefore a field of dispute, and, as such, it must be designed. Ensuring access is not enough; it is necessary to ensure a world. Here, world is understood as an ecology of relations, care, recognition, safety, and imagination.

Yet this meritocratic logic functions as a smokescreen that conceals structural mechanisms of exclusion. not because it provides ready-made answers, but because it enables speculation, questioning, and thus the prototyping of other possibilities. Ezio Manzini (2008) argues that design for social sustainability should focus precisely on creating “light infrastructures” that foster fairer and more collaborative ways of living together. In the university context, such infrastructures may range from institutional policies to informal support dispositifs, such as networks of care, sensitive methodologies, and plural curricula.

An institutional example of this movement is the recent creation, in 2024, of the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Affirmative Action (DIDAAF) at UFMA. DIDAAF has been working to promote policies aimed at gender, racial, and sexual orientation equity. It develops initiatives focused on the permanence of minoritized groups, the confrontation of violence, and the recognition of diversity as a collective asset. Its actions reinforce the idea that designing fairer academic environments also occurs through the formulation of inclusive, sensitive, and transformative policies.

This dimension of design as collective care compels us to rethink the role of the academic community. Faculty, staff, and students are not merely cogs in a system, but agents of its transformation. Care is not an affective bonus; it is a political technology. As Pihkala and Karasti (2016) emphasize, reflective engagement in co-design processes entails recognizing asymmetries and taking responsibility for them, designing with, not for; listening to what has not been said; naming what has long been silenced.

This perspective also resonates with Haraway’s (1995) notion of “situated knowledge.” The permanence of dissident students will only be possible if the knowledge they carry is recognized as legitimate. It is not enough to tolerate their presence; modes of knowing must be reconfigured. This means breaking with Eurocentric curricula, authoritarian methodologies, and exclusionary assessment practices. Above all, it requires acknowledging that the contemporary university is not “working” for everyone, and that this is not an individual failure, but an institutional project.

Designing against expulsion, therefore, means working with discomfort. It means opening cracks where there were only walls. It means creating zones of experimentation, risk, and affect within a system that values performance and silencing. There is no formula, there is attempt. Attempt, as Haraway (2023) reminds us, is a form of tentacular thinking: it errs, entangles, and relearns. To remain, in this sense, is a collective verb and a radical project.

5. REDESIGNING PERMANENCE

If permanence is a political project, then design can be its insurgent language. Contrary to what the functionalist tradition of design has taught, this project is not organized around the resolution of objective problems, but around listening to symptoms, to discomfort, unease, and that which escapes institutional indicators yet cries out in corridors, in silent dropouts, and in the psychiatric records of students who have fallen ill. The proposal here is not to sanitize the system, but to radicalize its reinvention; design, as a field of situated experimentation, offers the tools, sensibilities, and methods to do so.

The political gesture of “prototyping permanence” emerges precisely from the refusal to accept the university as it is. It draws inspiration from practices that already exist, often informal, marginal, or devalued, and elevates them to the status of technologies of resistance. One example is student self-managed spaces, where collective care, active listening, and networks of emotional and pedagogical support are built. These are temporary zones of autonomy within institutional rigidity. They function as living laboratories of political design, as they enable the experimentation of other ways of inhabiting the university and other ways of remaining.

When a professor decides to abolish numerical grading and adopts more dialogical assessment methods; when a group of students organizes workshops focused on care and collective sharing; or when a collective foregrounds digital accessibility in graphic design projects, these are all ways of transforming structure. They are prototypes of permanence, even if small, even if fragile. What is at stake is not the scale of transformation, but its capacity for rupture.

These practices do not operate in isolation. They are nourished by counter-hegemonic epistemologies, such as decolonial thought (Escobar, 2016), which denounces the coloniality of knowledge within Latin American universities, and ecofeminism (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), which insists on the centrality of care and interdependence as principles for organizing life.

University sustainability, therefore, must be de-essentialized. It is not a technical concept, but a field of dispute. As Manzini (2008) suggests, social sustainability is linked to the capacity to construct desirable futures, and this requires asking: desirable for whom? With which bodies, which epistemologies, which narratives? There can be no sustainability in which only some are allowed to remain; in which only some have a voice; in which only some are able to create. A sustainable university is, necessarily, a multiple university.

6. FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY IN DESIGN: LISTENING, QUESTIONING, AND CO-CREATING

What is sought, as a subjective construction within scientific production, through an authorial first-person account? We are not looking for generalization, but, inspired by Ursula Le Guin (2021), we aim to tell smaller stories, “the stories of oat grains”, instead of epic and meritocratic narratives. Thus, we present here a brief collective experience that both inspires and is inspired by self-reflective accounts developed throughout broader experiences within a research project dedicated to prototyping institutional gender policies through design.

To affect and to be affected is a sympoietic movement, once again activating Donna Haraway’s thinking. The collective is affected by the individual and vice versa, producing

intersubjectivities. Within the construction of a more sustainable university—according to the perspective defended in this article—the development of policies must converge with the situated aspirations of students who daily experience adversities and exclusions.

In this proposal, we experimented with an invitation to a feminist approach to research, informed by the decolonial practices of Ochy Curiel (2020), particularly through continuous listening and questioning within participatory design practices. Following the Afro-Dominican activist and researcher, we are prompted to reflect:

“What are the points of view in feminist research [in design]? When are we imposing gender in research [in design] and epistemological processes when studying racialized women, especially Black and Indigenous women? To what extent are we reproducing the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being when we transform race, class, and sexuality into mere analytical or descriptive categories, thus failing to establish a relationship between these realities and the modern colonial capitalist world order [in our design processes]?” (Curiel, 2020, p. 133, comments added by the authors).

This questioning perspective informed the design practices carried out through exploratory walks across six buildings at UFMA’s Campus do Bacanga. Students enrolled in Projeto Gráfico I were invited to listen to and question issues identified by other students who inhabit the different realities of the selected environments.

Initially, the groups conducted theoretical research, deepening and aligning their knowledge on design and gender. Each group presented a seminar on a specific theme: history; intersectionalities; bodies; spaces; decoloniality; and institutional policies.



Figure 1. Fragments of listening accounts collected by students during field activities. Authors: Amanda Costa, Maria Clara de Aquino, Stella Barroqueiro, Eryck Torres, Paulo Borges.

This figure presents excerpts collected during the listening practices conducted by students throughout the course activities. The composition combines short testimonies with photographic records of circulation spaces, illustrating how everyday university environments are experienced through feelings of restriction, insecurity, and social tension. Rather than identifying specific locations, the visual highlights how spatial arrangements, surveillance dynamics, and institutional cultures influence how certain bodies navigate and inhabit academic spaces. In the context of this chapter, the figure demonstrates how listening practices made visible the affective dimension of campus life, revealing perceptions that are often absent from institutional narratives.

The second stage involved visits and listening activities in the selected buildings, chosen either because they concentrate a large circulation of students or because they present particular sensitivities related to the theme. One example was a building associated with sports and physical training activities, where the exposure of bodies suggested the possibility of specific experiences related to gender and embodiment. Each group prepared interview scripts and was asked to listen to ten participants.

In the Sports Center, narratives emerged about discomfort related to surveillance and the judgment of bodies, especially female bodies. Students reported experiencing aesthetic pressure within the course environment, reinforced by body stereotypes. One participant (all names used in these accounts are fictitious, to protect the identity of those interviewed) stated that she had felt uncomfortable due to jokes and looks directed at her for not having the “expected body type” associated with the field. This monitoring of the female body also appeared in accounts highlighting the need for greater respect regarding clothing worn during practical activities, which are often tighter or shorter.



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Figure 2. Educational poster on gender diversity created by students. Authors: Amanda Costa, Maria Clara de Aquino, Stella Barroqueiro, Eryck Torres, Paulo Borges.

This visual artifact shows a student-produced informational piece developed as part of the course's pedagogical activities on gender and diversity. The material introduces distinctions between concepts such as gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and biological sex. Within the discussion, the figure illustrates how design practices were mobilized as tools for knowledge translation, allowing students to transform theoretical debates into accessible visual communication. The work reflects the role of design education in fostering critical literacy around gender in university environments.

The analytical framework used to interpret these accounts draws on Edward Relph's (1976) concept of topophobia, revisited by Flesler and Spataro (2024) in the context of university spaces. Topophobia refers to the negative emotional reactions — fear, aversion, discomfort — that individuals develop in relation to specific places. What led us to mobilize this concept, rather than, for instance, the broader category of harassment or aesthetic pressure, was precisely the spatial dimension that emerged from the accounts: the discomfort was not only interpersonal, but tied to the place itself. In the Núcleo de Esportes, the building and its dynamics: the exposure of bodies, the surveillance embedded in the course environment, the normative expectations attached to that particular space, were what made the experience hostile. It was the reading of Relph (1976) and Flesler and Spataro (2024) that provided the vocabulary to name what the accounts were already describing: a visceral rejection of a place that had been structured to exclude certain bodies. Topophobia is a concept introduced by Edward Relph (1976) and later revisited by Griselda Flesler and Maria Spataro (2024) in the context of affective cartographies of university space. It refers to the negative emotional reactions individuals develop toward certain places such as fear, aversion, or discomfort, and has been used in participatory design practices to map symbolic violence and feelings of exclusion experienced on university campuses.

In the BICT Center (Interdisciplinary Bachelor's Degree in Science and Technology), where engineering-related programs are concentrated, interviews revealed both infrastructural precariousness and social discomfort. One student reported feeling completely disconnected and unsafe in the building's spaces. In addition to the absence of welcoming environments, the inhospitable architecture and empty corridors evoke a constant sense of alertness. Here, topophobia appears as a visceral response to both physical and symbolic neglect: spaces not designed for collective well-being, but shaped according to a functionalist, technical, and exclusionary idea of permanence.



Figure 3. Infographic addressing harassment in the campus environment, created by students. Authors: Amanda Queirós, Maria Trindade, Matheus Barros, Nívea Almeida, Zenite Martins.

This image presents a graphic synthesis created by students based on data gathered during the research activities carried out in the course. The visual communicates perceptions related to harassment and everyday forms of violence reported within academic spaces, translating qualitative insights into a communicative format. In the context of the chapter, the figure exemplifies how design operates not only as representation but also as a means of amplifying lived experiences and making structural issues more visible within institutional contexts.

In the CCH (Human Sciences Center), although some participants described a friendlier atmosphere, accounts also pointed to structural issues, such as closed classrooms, a lack of adequate spaces for collective study, and accessibility problems. The memory of a harassment case within the building was also mentioned, alongside collective actions organized by student groups to support the victim. In this case, the space shifts between topophobia and topophilia: negative affects produced by institutional shortcomings coexist with positive affects generated through solidarity among students.

Definições

Vamos entender as definições das seguintes palavras:

Assédio:

É um comportamento invasivo que ultrapassa os limites do respeito e da dignidade da outra pessoa, pode ser com palavras, gestos, ou escritas que possam trazer danos à autoestima de alguém.

Preconceito:

O preconceito é um julgamento formado antecipadamente, pode ocorrer para com uma pessoa ou um grupo de pessoas de determinada: Raça, gênero, religião orientação sexual, sexo, crenças, classe social, deficiência, nacionalidade, valores.



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Figure 4. Educational booklet produced by students during the course. Authors: Ana Karoline Prado, Leissandra Santos, Ryan Cutrim.

This figure displays a page from an educational material developed during the course to explain key concepts related to discrimination and harassment. By presenting definitions in a simplified and visual format, the piece demonstrates how students engaged in the process of transforming complex discussions about violence, prejudice, and dignity into communicative artifacts. In the article's argument, this work reflects how pedagogical design practices can contribute to building shared vocabularies for addressing structural issues within higher education environments.

Thus, by mobilizing design as a situated and relational practice, these listening processes show that space is not given but constructed, and that this construction can (and should) be collective. What emerges, therefore, is an exercise in design as care, as proposed by Escobar (2016), in which listening becomes the first design gesture.



Figure 5. Homepage of a website developed by students as part of the course project. Authors: Amanda Costa, Maria Clara de Aquino, Stella Barroqueiro, Eryck Torres, Paulo Borges.

The final image presents a visual identity and introductory page of a student research initiative developed within the course. The project aimed to gather and organize information relevant to queer communities, reflecting broader discussions addressed during the class about diversity, representation, and belonging in academic spaces. Within the article, this figure illustrates how the course encouraged students to connect design practice with social inquiry, expanding the scope of design beyond aesthetics toward research-oriented and community-focused approaches.

It is important to note that although these practices generated significant outcomes, we chose not to explore them in depth in this article. Due to their methodological richness and analytical potential, these design processes will be further developed in a second article focused specifically on their pedagogical unfolding.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: REMAINING IS A COLLECTIVE VERB

Throughout this article, we have followed the trajectory of someone who had to leave in order to continue, someone who confronted the silent collapse of technical programs dominated by hostile logics, toxic masculinities, and exclusionary pedagogies, and who eventually found in design a breathing space. Yet this space does not emerge by chance. It is carved through struggle, sensitivity, and desire. It is here that design reveals itself not as ornament or superficial solution, but as a field for world-making as a technology of insurgency.

The listening practices carried out by students enrolled in Projeto Gráfico I across six major buildings at UFMA powerfully revealed this urgency. In the collected accounts, the university appeared in the flesh. In the corridors of the BICT, bodies move in fear; in the Núcleo de Esportes, the body itself becomes a site of judgment; in the CCH, collective hope coexists with structural abandonment. Through the gesture of listening with the body, mapping affects and naming topophobia, it became possible to experience a radical pedagogy, embodied in the theories of bell hooks (1994), Haraway (2023), and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). We learned that university space is not neutral; it is a practice. And it can be redesigned from the pains and potentials of those who inhabit it.

From this perspective, thinking about university sustainability without engaging debates on gender, race, class, and territoriality is not only insufficient, but perverse. It sustains the fiction of a neutral and meritocratic university while bodies continue to disappear from classrooms, student centers, and statistics. In this text, the metaphor of the prototype is more than a design technique. To prototype is not to arrive ready-made; it is to test, err, adjust, and remake together. It is to acknowledge that full permanence may never be “finished,” but is always under construction; in affects, in policies, and in the spaces that traverse us.

This line of thought resonates with Arturo Escobar’s (2016) proposal of design for transition, not toward linear progress, but toward a multiplicity of possible futures. It also aligns with Donna Haraway’s (2023) call to stay with the trouble as an ethic of engagement with complexity. For certain forms of existence, remaining at the university means staying with the trouble every day, negotiating exhaustion, loneliness, and invisibility. And still creating. Still loving. Still inventing openings.

This invention does not come only from “above.” It emerges from students, collectives, professors who deviate from protocol, staff members who offer care, and informal networks formed in the shadows of formality. These are the true agents of sustainability, because they sustain what the structure cannot. They are also those who can design what is yet to come.

There is, however, a risk: the risk of capturing these practices, institutionalizing them without listening, or turning them into trends or manuals. Feminism has already warned us about the dangers of toolkits that attempt to domesticate the radicality of care (Flesler, Neidhardt, & Ober, 2021). Caution is therefore necessary. The sustainability that matters is not the one that appears in reports, but the one that is felt in the body, in the body that breathes without fear; in the body that learns without self-erasure; in the body that remains without having to disappear.

By intertwining theory and lived experience, by writing with both the viscera and the bibliography, this article does not aim to offer definitive solutions. It seeks only to open space, to create a crack. It proposes that the university be understood not merely as an institution, but as a fragile, relational ecology, traversed by stories. And like any ecosystem, it can only be sustained through diversity, by welcoming what is other, and by ceasing to expel what does not fit.

If, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues, care is an ethic of involvement with the world, then a caring design is one that engages permanence as politics. It designs the university not as a site of meritocracy and exhaustion, but as a space for the creation of life; a life worth living, worth sustaining, and worth sharing.

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