

The background of the entire page is a complex, abstract artwork. It consists of a dense network of thin, dark, irregular lines that form a web-like structure. These lines are interconnected, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view of a material or a complex, organic structure. The lines vary in thickness and density, with some areas appearing more solid and others more sparse. The overall color palette is a range of greys, from light to dark, giving it a textured, almost three-dimensional appearance.

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Editorial

Design in the Thick of Things: Organizations, Transitions, and Cultures of Practice

This issue of the Strategic Design Research Journal (SDRJ) brings together nine articles that show how design happens inside hospitals with overstretched nursing teams, operating theatres trying to meet net-zero targets, inside micro-enterprises negotiating fees with clients who see design as a commodity, government programmes that speak the language of innovation but rarely fund it, and communities whose textile traditions carry centuries of meaning that a “pattern” cannot fully capture. A key feature of this issue is the wide geographic variation, spanning Thailand, Brazil, Italy, Scotland, Spain, Indonesia, and The Gambia, across both the Global South and North. The contributions gathered here seem to converge on a shared conviction: design knowledge is always elaborated in frictional dynamics with real organizations, economies, and cultures, not despite them. We can also see convergence in terms of themes.

The first theme involves sustainability transitions and gathers around design’s attempt to operationalise systemic and sustainability transitions. Mattia Italia and Filippo Parolini’s two longitudinal case studies of Design for Sustainability Transitions inside companies identify contextual and human factors that reshape supposedly linear transition frameworks as they meet organisational reality. Beatrice Villari, Riccardo Torta, Daniela Sangiorgi and Zijun Lin extend this reflection to service design, proposing four paradigm shifts (beyond linearity, solutionism, reductionism, and short-termism) that reposition the discipline as a long-term, reflexive agent of socio-technical change rather than a toolkit for discrete service fixes. Klaus Kaulicke and Lázaro Cremades offer a complementary, more granular account from an infrastructure-constrained development context: their study of an electric-mobility project in Gambia shows how “evidential friction” between assumptions and operational conditions forces problems to be continually reformulated, turning situated knowledge into a legitimate epistemic resource rather than mere contextual noise. Paul Rodgers, Lucy Welsh, Euan Winton, Lewis Urquhart and Niki Taylor ground these same transition ambitions in a strikingly concrete object: a reusable, plant-based theatre cap developed with NHS Scotland, where sustainability is measured not in frameworks but in millions of items diverted from landfill and improved conditions for staff. Together, these articles trace a throughline from theory to prototype, insisting that transition design earns its legitimacy in the specificity of practice.

Codesign as an institutional intervention emerged as a second theme, particularly within the contexts of healthcare. Larissa Berlato, Renata Hinnig, Diogo Camillo and Dirce Maria Capobianco Fava describe a codesign process at Hospital Israelita Albert Einstein that generated ideas and implemented prototypes to address the well-being of nursing staff. The paper shows that participatory design can act on organisational and psychosocial conditions usually left to management or occupational health alone. Building on the earlier discussion, the NHS Scotland theatre cap project by Paul Rodgers and colleagues belongs equally to this theme: co-design with theatre staff was not a consultative gesture but the mechanism through which comfort, communication under PPE, and environmental performance were reconciled. Both papers suggest that codesign’s contribution to health systems lies less in generating

innovative artefacts than in making previously invisible operational and emotional labour visible to design for.

Two articles set in Bangkok's creative economy explore the political economy of design practice. Viritpol Ponark and colleagues examine what happens when strategic ambition meets operational precarity. "Institutional Fragmentation and the Operational Realities of Design Studios in Thailand's Creative Economy" traces a disconnect between macro-level government support schemes and the micro-level realities of design SMEs, showing how incomplete policy, strategic misalignment, and fragmented institutions leave practitioners without the safeguards needed to act as strategic partners rather than disposable vendors. "Navigating Monetisation Fragility" pushes this argument further into the balance sheet, mapping how service fees, proprietary products, and IP royalties each fail differently: from the chronic undervaluation of "invisible cognitive labour" to scaling bottlenecks and contract evasion. Read together, these papers ask the field to stop treating the business model of design as a technical afterthought and to recognise it as a strategic and political question in its own right, particularly in Global South contexts where the vocabulary of "creative economy" has outpaced the institutions meant to sustain it.

A fourth theme turns to design as a vehicle for cultural meaning and social innovation. Amanda Queiroz Campos revisits modes of design engagement through specific practices, arguing that these modes overlap and coexist rather than operating as fixed roles, and cautioning against equating individual interventions with systemic transformation. Desy Dwi Putri and colleagues take up a different register of cultural work, tracing the Nak/Naga serpent-dragon motif across Thai Praewa silk and Indonesian batik to build a cross-cultural framework for cultural branding grounded in local wisdom and community knowledge. Both articles remind the field that social innovation and cultural preservation are not peripheral to strategic design but are themselves strategic acts of positioning, translation, and value-making across markets and generations.

What unites these themes, ultimately, is a shared refusal of design as a distant, not-situated practice. Whether the terrain is a government funding scheme, a transition framework, a hospital ward, or a heritage textile, each article insists that design knowledge is organized in the encounter with operational, institutional, and cultural specificity, and that the friction generated by that encounter is not a nuisance to be smoothed over, but the very material from which strategic design is made, and the very drive of creativity and its corollary transformation. We hope this issue prompts readers to continue interrogating where their own practice meets organizations, and to treat that meeting point as a site of inquiry and imagination.

Editorial

Guilherme Englert Corrêa Meyer (Editor SDRJ)

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