7. Decolonizing design for cultural heritage and museums within a systemic change framework: discussing the participatory paradigm

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7.1 Cultural heritage at the crossroads of the sustainable transition

In today's world, despite awareness of the need for systemic change and calls for a pluriverse, with a post-human or – better – more-than-human and planet-centric perspective (Forlano, 2017; Escobar, 2018; Tironi *et al*., 2024), design still often acts as a structure of authority and power. It operates as an exogenous entity on complex systems, somehow disregarding the value of endogenous processes.

In the Cultural heritage domain (hereafter CH), already the subject of a profound discussion and transformation (Borowieki, Forbes and Fresa, 2016) and at the crossroads of the twin transition (JPI Cultural Heritage and JPI Climate, 2022), and therefore regarded as an ecosystem with great cultural complexity (Dameri and Demartini, 2020), the inconsistency of this pretentious design approach emerges clearly.

Acknowledging the importance of the cultural system in sustainable development (European Commission, 2019), heritage must have

a social, political and economic impact, bringing innovation in community advocacy, sustainable change and/or professional practices (Jelinčić, 2017): to embrace the challenge of a holistic innovation based on culture (Sonkoly and Vahtikari, 2018), design for CH places its action at the intersection between heritage, technologies, local development, and social and cultural innovation (Irace, 2013; Lupo, 2021).

Accordingly, one may have observed a recent exponential increase in projects that aim to be democratic, addressing the DEAI (diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion) imperative: they are mainly based on participatory and community-centric approaches, through to co-creative ones.

In our view, most of these experiences are unconsciously biased by a design approach infused with prejudices of values and potential misuses relating to inclusion, participation and co-creation. They are conceived as intrinsically sustainable premises, but without considering the potential bias with which they are framed and practiced in a positivist mode of design thinking, and rational ethic, instilled by western hegemony in the development of sustainable design processes.

The CH system is the one that magnifies the tremendous urgency of decolonizing its processes (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond, 2020) possibly with a design approach (Tunstall, 2023; Tironi *et al*., 2024) to really address a pluriverse development. In any case, few heritage studies fully succeed in truly decolonizing (Brulon Soares, Chagas, Mellado González and Weil, 2022), while others still refer to a post-colonial perspective that merely «enables new voices» (Turunen, 2020).

This study therefore proposes a critical discussion of participatory design (PD) processes in CH based on literature review, in order to evaluate and assess the effectiveness and impact of such practices.

The essay starts with a brief problematization of the concepts of participation in design and in CH, and the concept of decolonizing design. Next it moves into discussion of the selected research articles within mainstream design journals, the methodology used for selection and analysis, and then the results.

7.2 Challenges to face

Participation in design and CH

Participation in cultural heritage has an extensive literature and a rooted history (Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland, 2017; Hetland, Pierroux and Esborg, 2020). The concept has acquired different meanings over time: it can be based on contributive or collaborative projects led by cultural institutions in a context of shared authority, or on bottom-up practices outside of formal institutions, based on community initiatives that are not fully professionalized and akin to DIY (do it yourself) approaches. This complex scenario calls for a better definition of these different nuances.

The origin of participation can be traced back to the end of the 1960s, with Arnstein's seminal work on citizen participation: an eight-step *ladder* encompasses forms of illusory participation, approaches driven by tokenism and real citizen power and control (Arnstein, 1969). This initiated an assertive approach, by correlating high levels of participation with a positive stance and a high degree of democratization.

The concept of participatory culture regained visibility at the beginning of the year 2000, with the integration of new social media technologies and a transformation from expert-driven projects to alternative models of knowledge production. For marginalized or contested heritage, where the institutions were more reluctant to digitize collections, the role of volunteer communities became crucial in preserving and archiving (Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland, 2017). In this interpretation, participation is interrelated with community heritage discourses (Watson, 2007), indigenous practices in curating (Kreps, 2009) and the formation of interpretive communities (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). However, at the same time technology affects the opportunities and capabilities for non-participation, such as resistance, rejection and exclusion (Wyatt, 2003).

Within museums, participatory approaches are coping with visitors and audience engagement in different ways: in 2010, Nina Simon outlined four different types: *contributory projects*, *collaborative projects*, *co-creative projects* and *lastly hosted projects*, in which the level of institutional involvement decreases and the required community skills increase. Following this trend, museums developed contrib-

utory practices, with the creation of user-generated content, and by co-curation strategies, often focused on preservation (Mydland and Wera, 2012) and promotion (Salvesen and Keithsch, 2021). A co-design approach can be recognized where the collaboration between people and formal institutions is encouraged by design processes (Lupo and Trocchianesi, 2016; Vermeeren, Calvi and Sabiescu, 2018; Avram *et al*., 2019).

In the scenario of co-creation (Grcheva and Oktay Vehbi, 2021), scholars started to talk about *crowdsourcing*, specifically connecting the participatory approaches to digital content (Oomen and Aroyo, 2011). In this context, the concept of sharing authorship also became relevant (Ridge, 2014). Crowd involvement can also come into CH organizations' data collection processes through visitor sensing technologies (Cappa, Rosso and Capaldo, 2020).

At the beginning of 2020, the *participatory turn* (Bonet and Négrier, 2018) was acknowledged as a framework calling for institutions to change their model of interaction with all their stakeholders, through participatory heritage management (Heras *et al*., 2019). Cultural democracy is virtuously linked with the creative economy in order to bridge top-down participation with bottom-up approaches that also endorse creation from non-experts (Bonet and Négrier, 2018; Arnaboldi and Diaz Lema, 2021).

Only recently has some criticism of the participatory approach emerged: top-down institutional management promoting community participation has been a subject of concern in that it may inadvertently strengthen some forms of control of the heritage (Aykan, 2013). A critical stance on collaborative approaches started, seeking to avoid the risk of *romanticizing* participation (Collins and Cook, 2014). Participatory forms should challenge the idea of experts as a source of power and authority (Greenbaum and Loi, 2012; Herlo, Pierri and Schubert, 2019); therefore, scholars are questioning how concepts of democratization are framed and enacted, generating divides (Hetland, Pierroux and Esborg, 2020).

Finally, the post-colonial theory entered the participatory discourse as an attempt to frame the concept of emancipatory participation and decentr participatory design knowledge (Mainsah and Morrison, 2014).

7.3 Decolonizing design

The concept of decolonizing design has only recently entered the design literature (Tlostanova, 2017; Schultz *et al*., 2018; Akama *et al*., 2022; Tunstall, 2023). Its genealogy is comprehended within a wider discourse about the call for systemic change, regarded with different approaches that share a conscious understanding on new balances between all living beings. Some are more concerned with respect for all human beings, for example plurality and pluralism (Alvelos and Barreto, 2022), endogenous design (Cardini, 2022), autonomous Design (Pierri, 2019), indigenous design (Munroe and Hernandez Ibinarriaga, 2022), transformative design (Hakio and Mattelmäki, 2023) and hypervernacular design (Kosten and Huybrechts, 2023); others look at coexistence with non-human agencies, such as post-human design (Forlano, 2017), more-than-human design or post-anthropocentric worlding (Tironi *et al*., 2024), pluriverse (Escobar, 2018; Leitão and Noel, 2022) and decentring designers' privilege accounting for multi-species (Nicenboim, Oogjes, Biggs and Nam, 2023). In this broad frame (whose implications cannot be discussed here in detail), decolonizing design means recognizing that what are intended as *global design practices* belong mainly to the Global North, and therefore call for new balances between dominant and marginalized discourses, between centre and periphery, that:

> resist "common denominators" and singular frames of reference, avoiding an "understanding" that seeks to pacify, control, erase, or occupy (colonize) the situation from which the "other" speaks (Schultz *et al*., 2018, p. 2).

In this section we will outline the contributions that make explicit reference to PD or CH or both. Some authors emphasize the need to decolonize participatory research (Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen, 2021), as well as for co-design (Hernandez Ibinarriaga and Martin, 2021). Some design explorations tending towards the pluriverse (Miettinen, Mikkonen, Loschiavo dos Santos and Sarantou, 2023) are related to CH, discussing the way in which interactive technologies enable participation (Häkkilä, Paananen, Suoheimo and Mäkikalli,

2022) but only to respond to a plurality of users. A systematic liter-
ature review has been conducted by the same authors (Paananen,
Suoheimo and Häkkilä, 2022) about decolonizing design with technol-
ogy in cultural heritage contexts, using participatory approaches that
support the integration of politics and power within the local
and cultural context.

Some works focus specifically on decolonizing PD in CH, for in-
stance in memory-making with youth (Smith, Winschiers-Theophilus,
Kambunga and Krishnamurthy, 2020) arguing how decolonizing PD
practices may be developed through contextualized, transdisciplinar,
and transcultural approaches. At the forefront of the challenges, the
black-feminist approach is used by Clark and Lewis (2016) to question
the perpetuation of existing Eurocentric models of heritage, and the
historical exclusion experienced by minority ethnic and refugee
women when accessing museums.

7.4 Framing the CH narratives within design journals

For the purpose of this essay, an analysis has been conducted on
design research articles in mainstream design journals which present,
to different extents, reflections or case studies employing communi-
ty-based participatory design practices (hereafter PD). The objective
is to discuss how the participatory approach is framed in the dominant
narrative, and if it is affected (inadvertently) by exogenous thinking that
leads to bias or misuses of participation, or conversely, is consciously
employed to address effective decolonizing processes in CH.
The selection criteria were as follows:
- span of years: 2013-2024;
- search base: a list of renowned international design focused
  journals selected from (Gemser *et al*. 2012) plus some recent-
  ly established international journals (cf. Table 1);
- no paper from any conference has been considered, nor open
  access articles in the *Open Research Europe Collections*, or
  books (a deliberate choice in order to reveal the mainstream
  design narrative promoted by design journals);

- to determine the *Panel 1* related to PD, a list of keywords has been applied (from participation to collaboration, engagement, co-design, up to accessibility, inclusion, diversity, community, etc.);
- to determine the *Panel 2* PD in CH, the articles from the previous panel were refined, by direct references, within the article, to institutional typologies of CH only (e.g. museum, collection, ICH);
- as regards databases, only the journals' websites have been used.

The analysis has been qualitative, reviewing the content by detailed reading in order to compare and evaluate the different assumptions, definitions, aims, developments and uses (or misuses) of participatory practices in CH.

Table 1.
Design Journals list.

Journal	List
The design Journal	from Gemser et al. 2012
Design and Culture	from Gemser et al. 2012
Design Issues	from Gemser et al. 2012
Design Studies	from Gemser et al. 2012
International Journal of design	from Gemser et al. 2012
She-Ji	added
CoDesign	added
Strategic Design Research Journal	added

7.5 An overview on criticalities of participation in CH

More than 100 design research articles have been scrutinized, and 50 have been considered relevant and analyzed (the complete list can be found in Annex I).

Many of the articles in *Panel 1* are merely instrumental, discussing PD research methods, tools and techniques (Broadley, 2021) without questioning or even mentioning the possible risk of a domesticating approach and falling into solutionism and toolification.

There is now an army of people trained or self-equipped with an arsenal of methods being invited into boardrooms, co-working hubs, and community halls, or participating in jams, hackathons, and living labs, where they are co-designing products, systems, or services to affirm design's orientation towards making a *positive impact* (Akama, Hagen and Whaanga-Schollum, 2019, p. 60).

Others have a paternalistic approach in the way they try to use design to empower low-income and *developing* contexts to overcome *deficiencies* in knowledge (Jagtap, 2002). In any case, some authors acknowledge that in PD with vulnerable groups, any attempt at *genuine inclusion* can be challenging, since barriers to participation remain (Hodson, Svanda and Dadashi, 2023).

Some authors instead raise concerns about PD: Kelly (2019) calls for ethical principles for PD practice; Dore (2020) emphasizes the potential instrumentalization and failure of PD, challenging its claims to be democratic if it is used with a technocratic and uncontested institutionalized approach; Kraff (2020) explores *agonism* within PD processes to question power structures, but also highlights some preconditions for engaging in agonism. The notion of commoning and agonism have also been investigated by Hillgren, Seravalli and Agger Eriksen (2016) with regard to counter-hegemonic practices in PD, without excluding tensions in connecting adversaries.

In general, the concepts of indigenous design became relevant when discussing the legacies of colonialism and entrenched systems of *othering*. Indigenous-focused design methodology based on storytelling is conceived as a co-design space for cohesiveness and conversation by Barcham (2023). Akama, Hagen and Whaanga-Schollum (2019) propose respectful, reciprocal and relational approaches as an ontology of co-designing social innovation, to overcome the asymmetry of collaboration by reciprocity and mutual understanding; these authors also contest the use of binary categories like *Indigenous* and *non-Indigenous*. Others propose the concept of *autonomy* in design, to contrast with forms of control and unequal power relations and move towards *cultural co-design* (Testori and d'Auria, 2018). Recently the topic has also been approached indirectly through *transversal relationalities in co-making*, comparing strategies of resilience from the Global South and Global North

(Antaki and Petrescu, 2023), or infrastructures of oppression that render participants invisible (Del Gaudio, 2023).

Finally, a few papers explicitly rebut optimism about participation (Pierri, 2018), or highlight the risks co-design poses for democracy in the redistribution and delegation of power (Del Gaudio, Franzato and de Oliveira, 2020), and present the contradictions and limits of co-design when acting without calling into question categories such as development (Noronha, 2018).

However, the effective results of these concerns are not always evident. Almost all the papers do not properly assess their decolonizing proposals. The value of collaborative research is fully acknowledged in the literature (Whitham *et al*., 2019), but PD practices are only usually assessed in the context of participants' capacity to participate and the quality of results (Drain and Sanders, 2019), without problematizing in a decolonial framework.

Raman and Tara (2022) claim to contribute to a right-based ethos for PD and provide a framework to shift the mindset of PD through the use of individualized and subjective methods on sensitive topics. However, they do not fully explain how they mitigate their dominant position in terms of knowledge and perspective to really pursue their *ethos of practice* (Raman and Tara, 2022).

Kambunga, Smith, Winschiers-Theophilus and Otto (2023) argue that it is an intentional design practice that is capable of supporting alternative ways of knowing and doing in *practice*, even in the PD field: in a participatory memory-making project in Namibia, they employ a *safe space* framework for decolonizing PD, a space informed by the notion of *cultural hybridity* (Bhabha, 1994).

Among the articles of *LR Panel 2*, some speak broadly about heritage in the form of art (Knutz and Markussen, 2020), memory (Grisales-Bohórquez, Reynolds-Cuéllar, Muñoz Martinez and Sicard Currea, 2022), or community (Tang and Nakarada-Kordic, 2023), and are therefore not fully transferable.

Most of the articles related to CH and museums consider participation and co-design as merely instrumental to enriching the experience of the heritage (Avram, Ciolfi and Maye, 2020; Rørbæk Olesen, Holdgaard and Sundnes Løvlie, 2022), without mentioning any potential bias. Similarly, Bosco, Gasparotto and Lengua (2023) conducted a

comparative analysis of four projects that apply co-design processes to CH, showing the different forms that PD can assum, but ending up simply identifying good practices.

Critical thinking seems prevalent in the problematization of PD in CH, but without explicitly mentioning the word decolonizing. Taffe and Kelly (2020) highlight the difficulty of using PD approaches for creating community museums, because participants' roles became ambiguous, resulting in the need to continually negotiate leadership of the project. Tang and Nakarada-Kordic (2023) claim to use critical design as a means of sparking discussion and debate in participatory exhibitions; however, it's not acknowledged that using conversational artefacts can bring intrinsic bias into community engagement.

Finally, a few studies explicitly refer to decolonizing PD in CH. According to Rizvi (2018), decoloniality becomes a critical heritage discourse when it is critically negotiating the past and can be unfolded by community-based participatory practices. The abovementioned study by Kambunga, Smith, Winschiers-Theophilus and Otto (2023) is the only one in which the approach towards decolonial PD practice is described in detail. Researchers are engaged in very contextual and situation-specific discussions while aiming for inclusion and transparency, about memories of past colonialism and the apartheid system in Namibia.

In general, however, in the papers analyzed, all the critical stances on decolonizing design, participatory practices and cultural heritage remain at a somewhat theoretical level, discussing such concepts as sensitivity, reciprocity, dignity, positionality, dialogue, democracy, intersectionality, activism and resilience in PD. However, it is not yet evident how these critical stances are applied and working in practice, nor any clear assessment of their effectiveness is provided. Empowering and enabling community-led heritage by PD seems to be the most-employed approach, but its practical use is still debatable and needs further study, since it often seems to be infused with the dominant design position of condescending supremacy of knowledge, conceived in a western and Global North perspective.

7.6 Overcoming the gaps for decolonizing CH

Albeit with some limitations (for instance: span of years; limited list of journals; exclusion of conference papers and books; choice of keywords; and above all, qualitative analysis based on desk research data and subjective reading from a western and privileged perspective), the analysis illustrates how intrinsic and unintentional biases remain to be overcome, characterized by a so-called tokenism approach (Leitão and Noel, 2022) which does little to change the disparity and inequalities of dominant and stereotyped participatory-driven CH narratives based on empowerment. The analysis reveals cases of rhetorical (openly declared, fictitious and/or disguised) use of participation in CH, without sufficiently demonstrating whether and how it is improving comprehension and experience of the patrimony, nor assessing its real long-lasting impact on better knowledge and transmission; therefore, there is a risk of critical instrumentalization of such practices in a frame of citizenship rhetoric (Aykan, 2013; Dore, 2020).

This is noteworthy, considering how the topics are instead critically investigated in the design discourse (Lupo, 2023) by books, papers in design or design-related conferences and articles in non-mainstream design journals, whose authors, in any case, are usually the same people, as evidenced by the recurring names. It seems that a small but well-known and established community of design scholars has a specific interest in and knowledge of those topics.

Reassuringly, some critical standpoints about decolonizing design emerged in the mainstream journals too. The topic has gained visibility in the last five years, especially thanks to a few authors who publish in books and design conferences but also in prestigious design journals.

Moreover, starting from a post-colonial and decolonizing perspective, some design approaches challenge global homogenization practices in CH, calling for more plurality and considering the needs of the CH ecosystem as priorities, in order to debate and transform the participatory paradigm, and reposition PD and co-design (Avram *et al*., 2019).

In any case, further work is needed to verify and fully assess design practice, for instance detailed analysis of collaborative research projects in the field and their practical application in decolonizing PD, and potential misuses or bias that can generate divisions

in a collaboration. A systematic analysis of collaborative research projects funded under competitive EC calls is currently under way, and will be presented in a future work.

7.7 Conclusions

To drive systemic change through design, it is necessary to rethink the dominant design vocabulary and position of supposed supremacy, and therefore challenge the democratic claims of participation in CH, acknowledging the legacy and inheritance of more endogenous and autonomous design processes (Cardini, 2022) also in the CH system, which is an intrinsically evolving and complex entity that lives and grows with an inner intelligence and balance in self-preservation and transformation.

Design should seriously question its consolidated vision on CH, sometimes taking a step back, but not assuming a renunciative position. Although in this essay we do not yet provide suggestions on how to achieve an effective pluriverse and decolonized practice of participation in CH, we argue that our theoretical contribution, based on evidence in the literature, can contribute to a wider awareness on the topic, and stimulate more attentive monitoring and self-analysis of the most potentially triggering and cumbersome design processes for CH.

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