Pluriversal Design as a Paradigm

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Editorial: Pluriversal design as a paradigm

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Abstract: This track, organized by the Pluriversal Design SIG, aimed to discuss the idea that pluriversal frameworks represent a distinct paradigm – in contrast to the universal design paradigm. While important in their own right, these two paradigms (universal and pluriversal) deal with diversity and plurality in fundamentally different ways. We recognize the potential contribution of both paradigms to human flourishing. However, they are based on different worldviews and have different goals. This track welcomed papers that explore the conversation/argument. The 11 papers accepted have been divided into two sections. The first section examines pluriversal design as a localized practice (pluriversal practices from around the world). In contrast, the second section looks into the theory of pluriversal design and its potential to transform design practice and research.

Keywords: pluriversal design; universal design; paradigms; design theory

1. Introduction

The concept of the Pluriverse—a world where many worlds fit—emerged from the Zapatista movement and was popularized in the world of design by Arturo Escobar (2018). In the last five years, we have seen the terms "pluriversal" and "pluriversality" increasingly used by designers from multiple fields. It is often used as a synonym for initiatives related to diversity, equity, inclusion, plurality, multiculturalism, or decoloniality. So why should we use the terms pluriversal and pluriversality? What is pluriversal design? And why should it matter to designers? Those are the questions that motivated the creation of this track.

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As we see it, pluriversal frameworks represent a distinct paradigm, one in contrast to the *universal* design paradigm. While important in their own right, these two paradigms (universal and pluriversal) deal with diversity and plurality in fundamentally different ways. We are not suggesting that one paradigm is right and the other is wrong, it is not a binary, but a spectrum.

Guba and Lincoln define a paradigm as "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (1994, p. 105). Briefly, paradigms are based on fundamental ontological, epistemological assumptions. However, another dimension is involved in the case of a design paradigm: the axiological assumptions. That is, *what is the aim of design*, and *what do we value?* And while we recognize the potential contributions of both paradigms to human flourishing, any discussion about the term 'pluriversal' must begin by understanding it in relation to 'universal'.

Pluri = many, Uni = one, and Verse = turn. So, while the universe recognizes one turn, one way of being, and one world in which we all live, the pluriverse recognizes there are many turns, ways of being, and worlds. Worlds are the meta-narrative(s) (or ontologies) about what reality is, what the purpose of life is, what happiness means, how the world works, and so on. The planet has been immersed in a "universal" mega-narrative that originated in Europe (and is currently carried on by the Global North), which we name modernity.

The 'universal' paradigm is grounded in the belief that we all live in one single world – within the dominant narrative in which the main characters have been affluent white men from the Global North. The universal paradigm strives to make this *one-world world* (Law, 2015) more equitable and just; it is about convergence, normalization (making the one "normal" narrative work for everyone) – and sometimes assimilation, othering, exotification, or tokenism. Within this paradigm, designers strive to cater to multiple cultures and diverse users, remove barriers, reduce deficits, increase access, and include marginalized perspectives and voices – e.g., making people of color play significant roles in the dominant world narrative, but without transforming the underlying plot.

The pluriversal design paradigm is expansive and grounded in divergence. It recognizes many ways of being and world-making. In the pluriverse, where multiple worlds and alternative narratives co-exist, people from diverse cultures and geographies struggle to enable alternative plots to flourish. Pluriversal designers can contribute to the alternative plots by focusing on, for instance, societal transformation, the self-determination of local communities, alternative ways of world-building based on different metaphysical choices, and the interdependence of all beings.

The monumental crises of the modern world underline the importance of discussing divergence and multiple ways of inhabiting the Earth. The foundation of pluriversality is the recognition that the one model of life and the style of world-making of the Global North (modernity) resulted in catastrophic unsustainability. We are on the verge of an environmental collapse that will not spare any being on this planet — not even those

societies that have so far profited from the one-world world of modernity. Therefore, it is time to open space for other models of society to (re)emerge and flourish. The Pluriversal SIG, sponsoring this track, was established to foster a global design community to make other "possibles" possible (Escobar 2020).

2. Papers

This track has welcomed papers that explore this conversation/argument on how pluriversal frameworks can be manifested/nourished/encouraged in design research and practice. The papers in this track have been divided into two sections. The first section examines pluriversal design as a localized practice, while the second analyzes the theory of pluriversal design.

2.1 Pluriversal is local

The papers in this section share pluriversal practices from around the world, from Gainesville, Florida, to different places in Latin America, India, Senegal, and China. They each demonstrate the role pluriversal design practice can play in resisting, recovering, reflecting, and re-imagining design.

Corona analyzes and documents a research experience in participatory design/codesign with local Gainesville drag performers. He presents a visual ethnography of Gainesville's drag culture through conversations with the queer community (performers and allies) and centered reflections showing a co-design model through a queer lens. Moving to a Latin American context, Mendoza-Collazosa, Durán, and Loschiavo conceive of design as an activity for social transformation in which the design process takes the form of activism. The authors explore and propose new ways of designing informed by the lived realities and context of people in the Global South. Remaining in Latin America, Agudin, describes a project on design between an academic institution (a researcher and students) and an Indigenous group in Argentina where they attempt to create a more horizontal relationship between the different actors involved in the design process through a decolonial lens. In an Indian context, Gahlot and Barnes review India's *jugaad* practice. Their deep analysis of the situated context of *jugaad* clearly demonstrates how the *jugaad* is born of a different worldview/epistemology, and they highlight that it cannot merely be replicated in other settings where a different worldview prevails. Grellier and Ndiaye identify junctures for creating new ways of design – community, frugality, value for local thought, and endogenous knowledge. Their work contributes a historical lens to the pluriversal design discourse as they examine the experience of Studio Wudé with leather crafts in Senegal. Finally, Mu explores how *Shanzhai* ('fake' in Chinese), a Chinese practice often associated with imitation and design plagiarism, can challenge modern design, intellectual property norms, and Western monopolies.

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2.2 Pluriversal is theoretical and transformative

Pluriversal theory is an instrument for resistance, recovery, reflection, and reimagination. In the section on theory, the authors focus on developing theoretical frameworks grounded in pluriversal philosophies that could forever change traditional research and design methods. The papers in this section propose new theories, methods, perspectives, and principles, deepening how scholars can engage with pluriversal design.

Formia, Lupo, and Mehmeti focus on transforming the scientific design community by rethinking the publication system in design based on pluriversal values. Sridhar seeks to adapt the discourse of the 'Anthropocene' to local contexts and cultures by translating primary and secondary research into practice-based processes for a tangible outcome. She not only leverages Western research methods (reading books, articles, essays) but also relies on indigenous approaches such as oral and folk stories about unintended consequences of human action, what they called "lesser-told tales, folklore, and local perspectives." Luo and Leitão provide a new perspective on the relationship of a designer working in the social sphere positing that the pluriversal practitioner must leverage place beyond a physical existence. Van Zeeland distills 104 academic papers into tools that might help move pluriversal design from concept to practice, including two foundational prerequisites and seven design principles. Saito, Gonzaga, and Van Amstel explore and exemplify the idea of coloniality of making in relation to design from a decolonial perspective by presenting three case studies that show the division and hierarchization between intellectual and manual labor in design.

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