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### POLARITIES LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS



#### THE NEIGHBORHOOD IS IN(CLUSIVE)

Ana Cardoso

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# THE NEIGHBORHOOD IS IN(CLUSIVE): LEVERAGING CO-DESIGN FOR COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersectionality of Design for Aging, Health and Well-being, and Social Design within the intricate socio-cultural ecosystems of local communities. It underscores the efficacy of participatory design and artistic practices as instrumental mechanisms in fostering collaborative creativity and addressing collective societal challenges. Emphasis is placed on the pivotal role of university-level students in enhancing socio-political interventions, thereby positioning them as vital advocates for social justice and community empowerment. This research is exemplified through the case study of “The Neighborhood is IN(clusive)” project, spearheaded by ESAD—College of Art and Design, and funded by the Healthy Neighborhoods Program, focusing on the Cruz de Pau neighborhood in Matosinhos, Portugal.

## INTRODUCTION

Communities and local networks can be complex socio-cultural ecosystems where participatory design and art practices can play a crucial role in fostering collaborative creativity and addressing collective challenges. Co-design may be able to act as a catalyst for social innovation by actively engaging community members in creating shared environments. Social design transcends disciplinary boundaries, harnessing the capacities of art and design to respond to multifaceted societal issues, thus creating mechanisms that instigate positive community transformations. University students appear to demonstrate a pivotal role in these processes, enhancing interventions with socio-political dimensions and contributing significantly to community empowerment. They can act as mediators between different age groups and stimulate sustainable change for local communities.

Participatory design methodologies encompass a range of techniques and approaches aimed at engaging community members in the design process. These meth-

odologies prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and empowerment, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives are heard and valued throughout the decision-making process. One key methodology within participatory design is co-design workshops, where community members collaborate with designers and artists to generate ideas, develop concepts, and prototype solutions. These workshops provide a platform for open dialogue and exchange, allowing participants to share their experiences, insights, and aspirations for their communities.

Another important aspect of participatory design is the use of participatory mapping and visualization techniques. These methods enable community members to collectively map out their environments, identify key issues and opportunities, and visualize potential solutions. By engaging in hands-on activities such as mapping, drawing, and model-making, participants gain a deeper understanding of their surroundings and are empowered to actively shape their built environment.

Figure 1.  
Senior inhabitants of Cruz de Pau community visiting ESAD – Collage of Arts and Design and collaborating with the project students, Matosinhos, Portugal, November 12, 2021. (Source: ESAD Archive, Bruno Mesquita, November 12, 2021.)



Furthermore, participatory design often involves iterative and collaborative decision-making processes, where community members are involved in every stage of the design process, from problem identification to implementation and evaluation. This iterative approach allows for flexibility and adaptation, ensuring that designs are responsive to the evolving needs and priorities of the community.

Overall, participatory design methodologies are essential tools for promoting inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment within communities. By actively involving community members in the design process, these methodologies foster a sense of ownership and agency, ultimately leading to more resilient, sustainable, and equitable built environments.

## 2. BRIEF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Social Design, positioned at the confluence of design and social sciences, is an evolving field that tackles complex societal issues and promotes positive social transformation. This review explores key concepts, theories, and examples of Social Design initiatives, particularly in the areas of Design for Aging, Design for Health and Well-being, and Social Design.

Participatory design methodologies empower communities and stakeholders to engage actively in the design process, ensuring solutions are genuinely responsive

to their needs and aspirations. An exemplary project is “Better Block,” which reimagines underutilized urban areas through collaborative placemaking efforts, fostering cooperation among local residents, businesses, and municipal authorities in the revitalization process.

The “Better Block” project, a grassroots urban revitalization effort, aims to convert neglected urban spaces into lively, pedestrian-friendly community hubs using temporary interventions. Originating in Dallas, Texas, in 2010, the project has inspired similar initiatives across the United States and globally. The core idea of “Better Block” is to showcase the potential of revitalized urban spaces through low-cost, temporary changes that engage local residents and businesses. Typically, a block or street section is selected for transformation, and temporary changes are implemented over a short period, from a weekend to a few weeks. The project often collaborates with community organizations, businesses, and municipal authorities to secure permits, coordinate logistics, and ensure participant safety. Volunteers play a crucial role in implementing these temporary changes and organizing related events, such as live music performances, workshops, and community meetings. This project serves as a model for community-driven placemaking and participatory urban design, empowering residents to reshape their neighborhoods in ways that reflect their needs, values, and aspirations.

Social Design interventions aimed at aging populations seek to create inclusive environments that promote independence, dignity, and social connectedness among older adults. The “Age-Friendly Cities” initiative, led by the World Health Organization, exemplifies this approach by advocating for urban planning principles that enhance the well-being of older residents through accessible infrastructure, tailored social services, and recreational amenities. To avoid reinforcing inequity, activities should be designed to overcome disparities rather than exacerbate them. Our physical and social environments, including family structure, social norms, and cultural traditions, affect people differently based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education level, or disability. When age-friendly activities address social exclusion and barriers to opportunity, building and maintaining functional ability can also reduce inequity among older adults (World Health Organization, 2023, p.8).

Digital platforms and tools are increasingly utilized in Social Design projects to facilitate civic engagement, community mobilization, and collective advocacy. Initiatives like “Better Block” and “Age-Friendly Cities” empower residents to express concerns, share insights, and collaborate on neighborhood improvement projects, thereby fostering a strong sense of civic ownership and agency in local decision-making processes.

In summary, these examples highlight the diverse range of projects and initiatives within Social Design, each addressing unique challenges and creating opportunities for nurturing environments that promote human flourishing and equitable social outcomes. By leveraging the creative power of design to address urgent societal issues, Social Design emerges as a powerful tool for building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities.

### 3. THE NEIGHBORHOOD IS IN(CLUSIVE) PROJECT

The Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project exemplifies how the synergy between co-design, art practices, and social design can be the motor for social change. Initiated by ESAD - College of Arts and Design, Matosinhos, Portugal -, this project aims to promote improvement on a local Matosinhos community - Cruz de Pau - specifically on its



urban space through active community participation. This initiative targets a diverse neighborhood with various demographic profiles and socio-economic needs. Cruz de Pau in Matosinhos, Portugal, exhibits demographic characteristics typical of a suburban neighborhood within a larger metropolitan area. It is characterized by diversified household compositions, with a blend of traditional and modern housing. While specific population data for Cruz de Pau may not be readily available, general trends can be extrapolated from the larger parish and municipal statistics.

The age distribution in Cruz de Pau is reflective of the patterns observed in São Mamede de Infesta and Matosinhos, featuring a balanced mix of age groups ranging from: young families to a significant proportion of elderly residents. This distribution is indicative of an aging population, a trend prevalent across many regions of Portugal, with a notable number of residents aged over 65.

The socioeconomic profile of Cruz de Pau encompasses a diverse range of income levels, predominantly low to middle-class households. They are characterized by varied educational attainment levels, supported by access to local primary and secondary educational institutions. Households in Cruz de Pau typically comprise of a mix of single-family homes and apartment complexes. It has predominantly nuclear families, with a presence of multi-generational living arrangements.

Having these characteristics in account the project was built to compete for the Healthy Neighborhoods Program. Funded by the Portuguese's government, this program it's a governmental endeavor targeting enhancements in socioeconomically disadvantaged locales. The Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project was ultimately ranked first in the application proceedings, underscoring its significance and potential impact.

This interdisciplinary initiative aims to foster cohesion among Cruz de Pau's denizens, comprising senior citizens, 8th-grade students from the local school, and graduate students enrolled in the Interior Design Master's program at ESAD. Through a series of meticulously orchestrated workshops and participatory exercises, spanning multiple generations, the project leverages co-design and participatory design methodologies to engender creativity, envisioning, and the cultivation of self-build techniques, thereby advancing environmental sustainability imperatives. This comprehensive approach not only facilitates the collaborative genesis of aesthetically resonant artifacts but also inculcates a profound sense of agency and stewardship within the community fabric.

Moreover, the integration of university students fortifies the mutually reinforcing nexus between creative praxis and sociocultural transformation, underscoring the transformative potential inherent in directing academic fervor towards the realization of socially consequential outcomes. The deliberate incorporation of co-design and participatory design methodologies underscores the project's steadfast commitment to embracing inclusive and synergistic paradigms in community development endeavors.

The Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project employs a sophisticated array of methodologies, with a primary emphasis on participatory design and co-design principles. Grounded in collaborative engagement, these methodologies serve as the bedrock for fostering inclusive, community-driven solutions to urban challenges. Participatory design, a cornerstone of the project, ensures that community members are active participants in every stage of the design process. Complementing participatory design,

co-design methodologies facilitate collective decision-making and knowledge sharing among diverse stakeholders. By bringing together individuals with varied expertise and perspectives, including designers, academics, policymakers, and residents, co-design sessions serve as forums for collaborative problem-solving and idea generation. Through hands-on activities such as mapping, prototyping, and scenario planning, participants collaboratively envision and co-create innovative solutions tailored to the unique needs and aspirations of Cruz de Pau's inhabitants.

Furthermore, the project integrates art practices as catalysts for social engagement and urban regeneration. Creative workshops, led by artists and designers, provide a platform for residents to express themselves artistically, explore their cultural heritage, and reimagine public spaces. By harnessing the transformative power of art, the project fosters connections between individuals and their environment, instilling a sense of pride and belonging within the community.

Figure 2.  
Students working on one  
of the five wood structures built,  
Matosinhos, Portugal, December 11,  
2021. (Source: ESAD Archive, Fernando  
Miranda, December 11, 2021.)



The use of self-build techniques further enhances community engagement and sustainability. By involving residents in the construction and maintenance of public amenities, such as community gardens, playgrounds, and murals, the project promotes a sense of agency and collective responsibility for the built environment. This hands-on approach not only fosters skill development and social cohesion but also ensures that interventions are tailored to local preferences and priorities.

Overall, the Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project's holistic approach to participatory design, co-design, and art practices fosters collaborative creativity, empowers communities, and generates inclusive solutions to urban challenges. By prioritizing community engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration, the project exemplifies the transformative potential of integrating design and social innovation in community development initiatives.

Amidst the backdrop of rapid urbanization and profound social shifts, the Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project emerges as a pivotal endeavor, epitomizing the integration of social design principles with a steadfast commitment to sustainable urban futures. This pioneering initiative is predicated upon the aspiration to engender social

inclusivity within urban neighborhoods, envisaging a future wherein community vitality thrives through the amalgamation of diversity, collaborative endeavors, and conscientious environmental stewardship. Subsequently, design interventions are meticulously tailored to engender spatial configurations and activities that foster accessibility, inclusivity, and holistic well-being for all inhabitants.

Central to the project's endeavors are a series of participatory workshops meticulously designed to cultivate community engagement, foster creative expression, and instill sustainable practices within the urban milieu. Spanning a spectrum of artistic and design disciplines, these workshops serve as crucibles for effecting positive transformations within public spaces while concurrently nurturing individual and collective creativity. From initiatives centered on self-build methodologies to ventures exploring experimental art modalities such as typography, skateboarding culture, photography, and regenerative architectural practices, the project espouses a multifaceted approach to community-driven urban development.

Figure 3.  
Christmas event promoted on one  
of the five wood structures built,  
Matosinhos, Portugal, December 17,  
2021. (Source: ESAD Archive, Bruno  
Mesquita, December 17, 2021.)



Furthermore, the project underscores its commitment to inclusivity by spearheading a range of initiatives tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of social communities. These inclusive endeavors encompass targeted interventions aimed at enhancing accessibility, fostering social cohesion, and promoting the well-being of marginalized demographics within the neighborhood fabric. By prioritizing the empowerment and integration of underrepresented groups, the Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project epitomizes a paradigmatic shift towards more equitable and socially cohesive urban landscapes.

### 3.1 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

#### PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

The project's methodology is grounded in participatory design, engaging community members, university students, and local institutions in collaborative activities. This co-design approach ensures that interventions are tailored to the community's unique needs and aspirations, fostering a sense of ownership and agency among participants.



Participatory design processes involve iterative cycles of feedback and adaptation, enabling continuous refinement of the interventions based on community input.

#### WORKSHOPS AND ACTIVITIES

A series of workshops and participatory activities were conducted, each designed to address specific aspects of community life and urban space. These activities were integral to the co-design process, providing platforms for skill development, creative expression, and community building.

#### SELF-BUILD WORKSHOP

This workshop focused on creating sustainable structures for public spaces. It engaged 8th graders and ESAD students in designing and constructing wood structures. Facilitators guided participants through the principles of sustainability and environmental integration, emphasizing hands-on learning and collaborative construction techniques.

#### REGENERATIVE ARCHITECTURE WORKSHOP

Aimed at stimulating teenagers' creativity, this workshop involved the creation of a habitable sculpture, integrating it into the school's architectural landscape. Facilitators from Riccardo Dalisi / Semi di Laboratorio and ESAD professors led the sessions, combining theoretical insights with practical applications of regenerative design principles.

#### EXPERIMENTAL ART WORKSHOP

This workshop encouraged participants to explore various artistic techniques, fostering creative expression and community engagement. Artists facilitated sessions focusing on drawing, printing, and plastic expression, enabling participants to experiment with different mediums and methods.

#### SKATE WORKSHOP

Participants designed and produced skateboards using sustainable practices. The workshop concluded with a presentation and testing of the skateboards by local students, guided by ESAD professors and a professional skater. This activity emphasized the importance of sustainability in product design and the potential for sports to unite communities.

Figure 4.  
Group of students and their skateboards, which were produced during the workshop, Matosinhos, Portugal, March 04, 2022. (Source: ESAD Archive, Fernando Miranda, March 04, 2022.)





#### LETTERPRESS TYPOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

Participants explored typographic composition, understanding its constraints and potential through hands-on activities. Facilitators from ESAD's typography office led the sessions, introducing participants to the intricacies of letterpress printing and the art of typography.

#### URBAN ART AND MURAL PAINTING WORKSHOP

Community members collaborated to create a collective mural, exploring inclusive drawing techniques and group ideation processes. Designers and artists facilitated the workshop, guiding participants in translating their ideas into a cohesive visual narrative that reflects the community's identity and aspirations.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

This workshop introduced participants to analog photography, encouraging individual expression and creativity through personal fanzine projects. Photographers facilitated the sessions, guiding participants in capturing unique visions of their reality and developing their photographic skills.

Figure 5.  
Multigenerational group exploring solutions during the photography workshop, Matosinhos, Portugal, May, 2022. (Source: ESAD Archive, Fernando Miranda, May, 2022.)



### 3.2 RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, RESULTS AND EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES

To initiate the project, ESAD master students embarked on an exhaustive four-week endeavor characterized by a meticulous process of research delineating the parameters of the intervention area. This preliminary phase was strategically designed to furnish reflective material that would underpin the subsequent self-building initiative while laying the groundwork for a forthcoming urban revitalization endeavor within the neighborhood. Employing a methodical approach, ESAD master students dedicated this period to the formulation of thematic maps encapsulating the salient features of the targeted locality. Serving as dynamic visual representations, these maps were instrumental in delineating the intricate dynamics inherent within the neighborhood's socio-economic and cultural milieu.

The structured methodology adopted by the ESAD master students facilitated an in-depth exploration of various facets of the neighborhood, encompassing vital elements such as traffic patterns, the availability of sports and cultural amenities, prevailing economic

activities, public transportation infrastructure, and accessibility metrics. By holistically examining these diverse components, the aim was to elucidate their interrelationships and discern their collective impact on community dynamics. This comprehensive approach aimed to elucidate the intricate interplay between these elements, thereby fostering a nuanced understanding of the neighborhood's socio-cultural landscape.

This methodological framework not only offered a tangible foundation for subsequent project phases but also empowered designers with invaluable insights into the community's inherent strengths, prevailing challenges, and latent potentials. By furnishing designers with a comprehensive understanding of the community context, this approach was geared towards facilitating the development of tailored interventions that effectively address the community's needs and aspirations. Thus, this methodological process played a pivotal role in informing the subsequent phases of the project, ensuring that the ensuing initiatives are rooted in a robust understanding of the community fabric and are aligned with its overarching objectives and aspirations.

ESAD students conducted extensive research on Cruz de Pau, developing thematic maps and conducting surveys to understand the neighborhood's dynamics. This preparatory phase provided a nuanced understanding of the community's socio-economic and cultural fabric, informing subsequent project phases. The research involved both qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, and demographic analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the community's needs and potentials.

The resulting system demonstrates the potential of Circular Design and co-design methodologies to bridge tradition and modernity. The project fosters a harmonious blend of Mediterranean architectural identity and innovative solar functionalities, contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of sustainable practices.

The project's impact was evaluated through several metrics, including community engagement levels, participant feedback, and the tangible improvements in urban spaces. The evaluation process involved both self-assessment by participants and external reviews by independent observers, ensuring an objective analysis of the project's success and areas for improvement. The study emphasizes the importance of material circularity and efficiency. Implementing circular systems and integrating renewable energies with sustainable agricultural practices highlight new paths for architectural innovation. Challenges such as some resistance to change and lack of legislation present opportunities for further research and technological development.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

"The Neighborhood is IN(clusive)" project exemplifies the transformative potential of co-design when coupled with a vision for sustainable futures. By embracing inclusivity, cultural diversity, and environmental consciousness, the project serves as a model for community-driven development. This article underscores the importance of collaborative endeavors in addressing socio-cultural challenges and advocates for continued exploration of co-design methodologies in fostering positive societal transformations.

In conclusion, our comprehensive examination of the participatory workshops within the Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project underscores their multifaceted methodologies and profound implications in fostering sustainable urban transformations and creative

expression within the Cruz de Pau neighborhood. Central to the project is the application of social design principles, prioritizing a human-centered approach to address societal challenges. By deeply understanding the unique needs and aspirations of residents, the project endeavors to create interventions that not only enhance the physical aspects of the neighborhood but also cultivate a profound sense of belonging and community cohesion.

As the project unfolds, tangible outcomes emerge, reflecting the collaborative efforts of residents, designers, and local authorities. The transformation of public spaces and the reinforced sense of community stand as testaments to the success of the initiative. Moreover, the project envisions multiple scenarios for sustainable futures, transcending mere environmental considerations to embrace a holistic approach that intertwines social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Inclusive social spaces have been envisioned, ensuring that public areas cater to diverse interests and abilities, with parks, community centers, and public art installations emerging as focal points for fostering social connections and community cohesion.

Neighborhood is IN(clusive) serves as a compelling exemplar of the potential of social design when coupled with a forward-thinking vision for sustainable futures. By embracing inclusivity, cultural diversity, and environmental consciousness, the project stands as a model for community-driven development, inspiring other neighborhoods to embark on similar journeys towards a more harmonious and sustainable tomorrow.

In essence, the Neighborhood is IN(clusive) project underscores the transformative power of participatory design, art practices, and social design in catalyzing positive societal change. Through active involvement of diverse community members, the project not only fosters participation and identification between inhabitants and their surroundings but also contributes to the overall betterment of urban spaces. This article advocates for continued exploration of collaborative endeavors, including multigenerational ones, in addressing complex socio-cultural challenges and unlocking the potential of participatory design, art practices, and social design in shaping more inclusive and resilient communities.



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