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Barbara Adams & Jilly Traganou

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“when life is happening, design has meaning”: Reflections from the Outgoing Editors

Barbara Adams  and **Jilly Traganou** 

Barbara Adams, Assistant Professor of Art, Design, and Social Justice at Parsons School of Design, is a sociologist whose interdisciplinary research looks at how knowledge is produced and political action is initiated through art and design projects. Her publications include the book *Design as Future-Making* (Bloomsbury Academic), the essay “Centers of Experience: Bodies and Objects in Today’s Museums” in *Experience Design* (Bloomsbury Academic), an afterword (“Proximity and the Ethics of Engagement”) to the book *Collaborative Social Design* (Routledge), and essays (“Art, Fabulation, and Practicing the Worlds We Want” and “Coordinates of Speculative Solidarity”) for the UNHCR series, *Project Unsong*. She is

It may seem obvious now, but the world looked very different in 2018 when we became editors of *Design and Culture* alongside Mahmoud Keshavarz. In our introduction as new editors, we set out a vision of design and culture not as static objects, but as active, verb-like forces shaped by – and shaping – contested power relations. We invited scholars and practitioners “to think critically about social justice, inclusion, and privilege, and to imagine the journal as a forum that can foster rich and provocative conversations across power-differentiated communities, geographic distances, and disciplinary divides” (Adams, Keshavarz, and Traganou 2019, 154). Guided by a commitment to equity in knowledge production, we supported work that challenged canons, encouraged experimentation across disciplinary and geographic boundaries, welcomed non-normative modes of scholarship, and amplified underrepresented voices and overlooked geographies.

co-editor in chief of
Design and Culture.
Adamsb01@newschool.edu

Jilly Traganou is Professor of Architecture and Urbanism at Parsons School of Design. Her current work examines spatial and material practices in prefigurative political movements, autonomous spaces, and concrete utopias, and explores poetic and speculative modes of writing as a means of reimagining spatial research. Her publications include *Design, Displacement, Migration: Spatial and Material Histories*, co-edited with Sarah Lichtman (Routledge, 2023); *Design and Political Dissent: Spaces, Objects, Materiality* (Routledge, 2020); *Designing the Olympics: Representation, Participation, Contestation* (Routledge, 2016); *Travel, Space, Architecture*, co-edited with Miodrag Mitrašinić (Ashgate, 2009); and *The Tokaido Road: Traveling and Representation in Edo and Meiji Japan* (Routledge Curzon, 2004), as well as various special issues she has guest edited for peer-reviewed journals. She is co-editor in chief of *Design and Culture*.
traganog@newschool.edu



Since its founding in 2009, *Design and Culture* has helped advance design as a field of inquiry, shaping its discourse through theoretical perspectives rooted in critical theory. The journal was founded to respond to a new era of design embraced by corporations as a “value-added imperative” while environmentalists and other groups started seeing “design as an essential bridge toward economic, social and ecological sustainability” (Guffey 2009, 6). The journal has broadened understandings of design beyond forms and aesthetics to its embeddedness in systems of production, labor, and consumption, and as a “matrix of human practices, perceptions, and articulations” (Julier 2000, 3), offering “reflection on what design means in contemporary culture” (Guffey 2009, 7). Over the past seven years, as design itself has changed, the journal has shifted from historical and cultural critique toward more explicitly political orientations. Articles now foreground social and environmental justice, Indigenous perspectives, climate futures, and practice-based knowledge, while amplifying voices from the Global South(s) and expanding the journal’s geographic reach. At the same time, *Design and Culture* integrates practice with theory, highlighting work from collectives, social movements, and anonymous practitioners, addressing both the oppressive and emancipatory capacities of design.

Contemporary designers and design scholars now recognize their conflicted position: that they actively contribute to the very crises they seek to transform. As Fry and Nocek argue, “modern design is at the ontological root of the universalisms responsible for the asymmetrical forms of violence that human and non-human life are facing today and in the future” (2021, 2). Such predicaments cannot be addressed by a single discipline, or by conventional design approaches or technical innovations alone. Critique and scholarship, while necessary, are not sufficient to dismantle extractivist systems. Yet design profoundly shapes the world that we inhabit, carrying both responsibility and radical potential.

Or, as bell hooks poignantly expresses: “when life is happening, design has meaning” (1998).

How can designers and scholars respond to global health emergencies, racial injustice, rising fascism, compromised planetary health, armed conflict, economic instability, displacement and migration, among other exigencies operating on a global scale? (How) can the ambitions of design be reconciled with its complicities?¹ As design researchers cultivate increasingly sophisticated forms of political literacy and sociological imaginaries, they also engage with the plural and expansive ways in which “life is happening.” As the Design Justice Network (DJN) puts it in a recent bulletin:

We’re fighting imperialism, zionism, ICE, detention and deportation, racism, transphobia, misogyny, the erosion of bodily autonomy, the resurgence of eugenics, ableism, the ever-deeper ties between Big tech, AI, and the military-industrial-information complex, and more. From Gaza to Los Angeles to Borikén, we know

that these systems of oppression are linked together, and our resistance must be deeply linked together as well.²

As editors, it was clear to us that although these issues loom large, those working in design studies and neighboring fields struggle with how to respond in ways that are consequential.

Scholarship in the field carries both responsibility and potential for reflection and assessment. Yet, as our Emerging Scholars note in their paper “In-Between Spaces: Reflections on the Emerging Scholars Workshop,” academic publishing is in crisis. Dominated by monopolies that restrict access through inflated paywalls and disproportionate open access fees, the system remains gated despite relying heavily on voluntary labor. It reflects two competing value systems: knowledge as a public good versus knowledge as a commodity. This model often prioritizes metrics over quality, marginalizes voices working in languages other than English, and constrains pluralism in research methods, forms of writing, and modes of argumentation.

Design studies and adjacent fields have seen substantial shifts in the seven years we served as editors of the journal. With the focus on decolonizing design and the move from human-centered design to a planet-centered approach, design has experienced a reckoning; one that resonates with historical precedents but arrives with new force. Regenerative strategies and justice-based concerns from the social to the ecological have become central components of design education, practice, and scholarship. These changes have significantly shaped the discourses of design, prompting designers and scholars of design to seek ways to contribute to larger efforts that alter entrenched and taken-for-granted practices.

Therefore, our aim from the beginning of our editorship was to nurture experimentation with both content and form. We launched the Emerging Scholars workshop along with new paper categories, such as Visual Essays, Multimedia Essays, and Statements of Pedagogy and Practice. These new categories were based on a more agile format that could speak to the field more quickly and in a more exploratory voice, while also being more open to the perspectives of practitioners. Such experimentations were more present in some of our special issues, such as the “Design in the Pandemic: Dispatches from the Early Months,” guest edited by Barbara Adams, Betti Marenko, and Jilly Traganou (*Design and Culture* 13:1, 2021), “Designing Against Infrastructures of Harm,” guest edited by Shana Agid and Paula Austin (*Design and Culture* 15:2, 2023), and the current issue “when life is happening, design has meaning” (*Design and Culture* 17:3, 2025), and we have to admit that soliciting such pieces of scholarship and reflective practice was not an easy task.

This special issue of *Design and Culture* – the last under our editorial leadership – reflects our commitment to diversifying design knowledge and practice while foregrounding experimental, situated,

and politically engaged scholarship. It deals with design responding to consequential life matters across continents, and particularly in the “majority world” (Alam 2008), whose designs have been for long marginalized by mainstream scholarship. The issue gathers research articles, visual essays, and pedagogical reflections spanning geographies, including Cyprus, Greece, Ghana, Chile, the United States, Tanzania, and the UK–France border. The contributions range from explorations of spatial practices in divided Cyprus to decolonial pedagogies in architectural education in Africa and South America; from studies of typographic dissent in the US to reflections on alternative scholarly infrastructures; from accounts of informal urban street life in Dar es Salaam to visual counter-narratives of migration in Dover and Calais. Collectively, these works position design as a relational and transformative practice; one that unsettles dominant narratives, reclaims space for livelihoods, bridges conflict, fosters new modes of relating and knowledge-making, and imagines more just futures in solidarity with others. They also demonstrate that design is not always a problem-solving enterprise but a practice of care, resistance, and pluriversal knowledge production. Several pieces are authored by collectives – including core members of the Emerging Scholars Workshop and the expanded Mobilities group of The New School – while two contributions take the form of visual essays, underscoring our commitment to collaborative and multimodal scholarship.

It has been an honor to serve as editors of *Design and Culture* for the last seven years. As we leave this role, we acknowledge the many people who have contributed to the journal’s success. We welcome Chiara Del Gaudio and Griselda Flesler as the new editors-in-chief and confidently leave the journal in their hands. We send an enormous thank you to Mahmoud Keshavarz, our co-editor in chief until 2023, the managing editors and copyeditors Laura McGuire, Chris Dingwall, and Macushla Robinson with whom we collaborated until 2023, and our recent and current Managing Editors Caroline Dionne and Dora Vanette, and copyeditor Laura Wing. Their work at the journal has been invaluable. Our gratitude also goes out to all the associate editors Leslie Atzmon, Chiara Del Gaudio, Dori Griffin, Victoria Hattam, Pinar Kaygan, Betti Marenko, Craig Martin, Lesley-Ann Noel, Bess Williamson, Wendy Wong, Juliana Yat Shun Kei, Armaghan Ziaee; reviews editors Maggie Taft (principal editor), Stephen Eskilson, Lina El Hakim, Tiphaine Kazi-Tani, Joshua Korenblat, Sabrina Rahman, Aaris Sherin, Bess Williamson, Armaghan Ziaee; social media editors Anna Talley, Sina Marleen Petersen, Lisa Marie Sneijder; emerging scholar workshop (ESW) peers Veronica Uribe del Águila, Teresa Naval and Anh-Ton Tran (founders), Isabella Brandalise, Mayane Dore, Lucía Garcés Davila, Anna Lathrop, Claudia Marina, Dani Melles, Gizem Öz, Zoë Prosser Lisa Sneijder, Dora Vanette, María Ximena Dorado Velasco, and ESW coordinator Jane Connory; special issue editors, authors, peer reviewers, readers, and the team at Taylor and Francis – particularly the production

group headed by Julie Weston – for making the journal a vibrant forum. None of what we accomplished at the journal would have been possible without Geraldine Richards’ continuous support and initiative. It has been a gift to work with such a skilled and generous editor. Many, many thanks.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. On this point, see Maggie Gram’s recent book, *The Invention of Design*.
2. Design Justice Network, Summer Update 2025, email communication, June 29, 2025.

ORCID

Barbara Adams  <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-3736-7895>
Jilly Traganou  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8348-085X>

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