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Designing for the Systemic Proximity: Positioning and Placemaking

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The workshop explores and strategically uses the concept of Systemic Proximity, focusing on how participants can effectively position themselves as designers, researchers and placemakers. This session is designed to question the objectivity of science, deepening the understanding of relational systems by incorporating self-ethnography and materiality as a tool for positioning within the design process. Participants are encouraged to bring their personal narratives and cultural insights into play. Through hands-on activities, they use boundary objects to map out and physically represent their individual experiences and societal roles, fostering a profound comprehension of their influence within complex socio-technical systems.

While systemic design offers robust methodologies for visualising and understanding the relationships within complex systems, this workshop posits that a deeper level of analysis is essential. It highlights the necessity of positioning and reflexivity in design, urging designers to engage in self-reflective practices to - first of all - see their roles and also better understand how they can influence the system. Designers must recognise how they and all other human and non-human elements are interconnected and interact. This workshop introduces a novel approach to city and placemaking through infrastructuring, which deepens the understanding of urban settings and fosters a stronger connection to the communities and spaces designers seek to enhance, pushing the boundaries of traditional urban design towards a more mindful approach.

This workshop draws directly from the prior work of the authors, including a publication presented at RSD11 in 2022, various projects based on the thorough "Plug-ins" concept, and ongoing findings from the PhD project titled "Designing for the Systemic Proximity: an investigation into the relational and systemic role of the City of Proximity to enhance positive change". These studies advance the concept of the City of Proximity from the idea of the 15-minute City but through a relational and systemic lens. It argues for placing "relationships" at the centre of the design processes, advocating that designing proximity-based services and systems should consider relationships as a fundamental design element in practice.

Designed to provide a reflective pause for designers tackling the complexities of urban environments — including work with vulnerable groups and various stakeholders on social, environmental, and economic issues — this workshop aims to create a dynamic, thought-provoking environment where theory and practice converge. Participants leave with enhanced skills to apply their learning in practical settings, contributing to ongoing dialogues in design and placemaking and pushing the boundaries of traditional urban design to create environments that bolster community life and connections.

KEYWORDS: systemic proximity, systemic design, design for relationships, placemaking, self-ethnography, materiality, infrastructuring

RSD TOPIC(S): Society & Culture, Sociotechnical Systems

Background

The workshop is anchored in a rich theoretical landscape that addresses current and urgent urban planning and design needs. This necessity arises from the growing complexity of urban environments, where the multifaceted dynamics of modern cities increasingly challenge traditional approaches to design and placemaking. Before delving into the content of this workshop and its background context, it is essential to acknowledge the distinction between "city planning" and "city making", as discussed by

Manzini, Fuster, and Paez (2023). They argue that cities require both approaches: city planning addresses the physicality of the *ville*, while city making addresses the sociality of the *cit  *. Here, we strengthen the social aspects of the urban context, emphasising a third field, “placemaking”, to foster community ties and enhance the livability of neighbourhoods.

Hence, the discourse on urban environments has evolved significantly over the past 60 years, with a particular surge during the pandemic, leading to the global spread of various city models that emphasise principles such as “the right to the city”, “back-to-basics”, and the enhancement of quality of life (Sedini et al., 2022). Accordingly, the starting point for this workshop and the research on which it is based is the 15-minute City. This model focuses on proximity, density, diversity, and digitalisation (Moreno et al., 2021), aiming to create urban spaces where essential services and facilities are within a 15-minute walk or bike ride, enhancing urban efficiency and reducing reliance on cars. To successfully implement this and other similar city models, several critical factors must be addressed (Alberti & Radicchi, 2022):

- **Sustainable Mobility and Traffic Decongestion:** Encouraging modes of transportation that minimise environmental impact and reduce urban congestion is essential.
- **Increase in Green Areas and Urban Greenness:** Enhancing green spaces systematically, redesigning community spaces, and revitalising areas such as markets and overpasses contribute to the aesthetic and ecological health of urban environments, improving the overall quality of life for residents.
- **Increase in Inclusive Public Spaces:** Developing spaces that are accessible and welcoming to all members of the community supports social cohesion and interaction.
- **Promotion of Participatory and Inclusive Governance:** Encouraging the active participation of citizens and stakeholders in urban development processes ensures that projects are responsive to community needs while entrusting management to local entities and monitoring interventions helps maintain effective and adaptive governance.

This latter point is foundational and should embrace transversally other initiatives, as it ensures that all urban development is responsive to the community's needs, fosters long-term engagement, and secures continuity and support for urban initiatives.

Therefore, expanding on the 15-minute City, the City of Proximity emphasises “care” and the identification of the so-called “hybrid communities of place” that integrate social interactions and community-focused living, moving beyond mere physical proximity to fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support among residents (Manzini, 2021; Manzini & Menichinelli, 2021). However, the former and well-known model often overlooks a more profound social and relational level (Pozoukidou & Chatziyiannaki, 2021), while the latter requires and lacks a system level.

Indeed, refining these reasonings and gaps, the concept of Systemic Proximity, presented at RSD11 in 2022 by the authors, introduces a holistic and mindful approach when designing for the City of Proximity. Systemic Proximity interprets and further extends the idea of the 15-Minute City and the City of Proximity by offering a relational and systemic point of view, considering proximity-based services as ecosystems of care (Vink et al., 2017; Vink, 2022), where communities are seen not only as groups of individuals living together but as integrated socio-technical systems (Jones, 2014; Baek et al., 2015; Lu & Sangiorgi, 2021). It draws from the multifaceted dimensions of proximity and walkability (Boschma, 2005; Speck, 2013; Gorrini & Bandini, 2018; Pei et al., 2019; Manzini, 2021), intersecting them with the Quintuple Helix model (Galvão et al., 2017; Carayannis & Campbell, 2009; McAdam et al., 2016; MacGregor et al., 2010), which expands this discussion by incorporating multiple layers of societal influence, including academia, industry, government, civil society, and the environment. This perspective goes beyond traditional urban design and intervention to consider a broader spectrum of influences that affect the livability and sustainability of urban environments. By embracing these theories, the Systemic Proximity concept aims to equip researchers, designers and placemakers with the knowledge to design services and spaces that are not only physically proximate but are also deeply embedded in the social, economic, and environmental contexts of the areas they serve.

The Systemic Proximity has identified a theoretical and practical gap that sees a possible action strategy in the intersection of Systemic Design and Design for Relations (referred now to as Design for Relationships) to address the complex interactions and dependencies within urban systems, emphasising the importance of relational dynamics in the design process (Avila, 2022; Briddle, 2022; Sadini et al., 2022). While Systemic Design offers methodologies and tools for visualising, understanding, and addressing the diverse components of complex systems, Design for Relationships emphasises and puts at the centre of the design process the intricate web of relationships that make up the system.

Where does the designer or researcher position themselves within the complex interplay of urban socio-technical systems? The workshop seeks to thoroughly explore this question by integrating the reflective practice of positioning through self-ethnography in the design process, particularly in placemaking. This topic has been extensively discussed in recent academic debates and beyond (Duan, 2023; Schouwenberg & Kaethler, 2022; Berger, 2015) and centres on our reasoning that positioning enables designers, researchers, and placemakers to understand better their own roles and the impacts they have within the systems they engage with. It recognises that every designer operates within a web of relationships that influence their decision-making, including their biases and power dynamics (Noel, 2023).

To do so, the workshop advocates for a more introspective approach by proposing a positioning activity through self-ethnography and materiality. The workshop would apply the Systemic Proximity approach to guide self-reflection activities, leading to the crucial distinction between the ego and the self (Dunlap, 1914; Forlano, 2016).

Topics covered

The workshop addresses two pivotal conference themes, Sociotechnical Systems and Society & Culture, by integrating essential design principles such as infrastructuring¹ and placemaking² through positioning and materiality. Participants engage with these principles through both a theoretical lens and practical applications, aiming to deepen their understanding of how personal and professional identities intersect with urban socio-technical systems and how they can actively influence these systems. These principles are grounded in the authors' prior work, including a publication presented at RSD11 in 2022, ongoing findings from the PhD project titled "Designing for the Systemic Proximity: an investigation into the relational and systemic role of the City of Proximity to enable positive change", and various projects based on the "Plug-ins³" concept developed by Manzini, Fuster and Paez (2023). Moreover, the session is further inspired by notable workshops and tools such as those led and designed by Aguirre-Ulloa and Paulsen at DRS8, which proposes a participatory activity of "Materializing Systemic Relations" through "Tangible Thinking Tools" (Aguirre-Ulloa & Paulsen, 2014, 2017).

These collected and consolidated experiences emphasise the concept of materiality, which, in this workshop, supports the positioning activity through self-ethnography. By engaging with tangible materials, participants can visualise and physically interact with the relationships that connect them within a system. This hands-on approach not only aids in the concrete manifestation of relationships but also embraces a better

¹ Infrastructuring (Hillgren et al., 2021) is about constructing relationships between diverse actors favoring a fluid and ongoing process. This approach views infrastructuring not just as the creation of physical spaces but as a methodology to map and foster potential social relations within a community, thereby catalyzing social innovation (Nuvolati & D'Ovidio, 2022).

² Placemaking involves acting on both tangible and intangible levels to maximize communal value and sustainability from a community-centric perspective. By configuring and re-signifying urban spaces, placemaking turns generic areas into vibrant, lived experiences that reflect and enhance the community's cultural and relational fabric (Sedini et al., 2023).

³ Plug-ins are defined by Manzini, Fuster, and Paez (2023) as multifunctional agents that integrate into urban frameworks, enhancing structure and social interactions within the city. Additionally, plug-ins facilitate a critical engagement with material interactions and urban policies, enabling a community-led redefinition of urban spaces.

understanding and awareness of these connections. By exploring indeed materiality in this way, participants gain a deeper understanding of their place and influence within the urban ecosystem.

Through this integrated approach, our workshop aims to equip participants with the understanding and tools necessary to design services and spaces that are not only technically proficient but also deeply embedded in the relational dynamics that define and drive sociotechnical systems and societal cultures. This holistic and mindful perspective ensures that urban design and placemaking transcend traditional boundaries, fostering innovative, inclusive, and deeply interconnected environments.

Objectives

The objectives and expected outcomes of the workshop are multifaceted. Firstly, it aims to explore and strategically utilise the concept of Systemic Proximity, emphasising the effective positioning of participants as designers, researchers, and placemakers within complex urban systems. By incorporating self-ethnography and materiality as tools for positioning, the workshop seeks to deepen participants' understanding of relational systems and challenge the notion of scientific objectivity. It introduces a novel approach to city and placemaking through infrastructuring, aiming to deepen the connection between designers and the communities and spaces they seek to enhance. Ultimately, the workshop aims to equip participants with enhanced skills to apply their learning in practical settings, contributing to ongoing dialogues in design and placemaking and pushing the boundaries of traditional urban design to create environments that bolster community life and connections.

By weaving these objectives together, the workshop aims to equip participants with practical skills and contribute significantly to ongoing research by providing a platform for applying and evaluating the theories discussed. Insights gathered from the interactions and feedback during the workshop enhance the doctoral research project "DESIGNING FOR THE SYSTEMIC PROXIMITY," enriching the academic discourse on how Systemic Design and Design for Relationships can foster meaningful social change within urban contexts.

Agenda

The workshop offers a session for researchers, designers and placemakers interested in exploring the intersection of personal and professional identities with placemaking. Drawing on the consolidated experiences of the authors over recent years, this workshop emphasises the strategic use of boundary objects, taking cues from the cultural probes and visual sociology used to expand the link between the designer researcher and the context or territory (Sedini, 2018; Mattelmäki, 2006; Selloni, 2017; Meroni et al., 2018) to facilitate a deeper understanding of Systemic Proximity and the relationships within urban systems. The structure ensures that participants receive theoretical knowledge and engage in practical activities that underscore the importance of positioning in urban design and placemaking. The condensed format is designed to maximise the learning potential within a limited timeframe, making it ideal for participants seeking to enrich their approach to urban design without a significant time commitment.

Introduction and Overview (10 min) A brief introduction to the workshop's goals, key themes, and the Systemic Proximity framework.

Icebreaking—Shaking Activity (40 min)

Physical Positioning Map: Participants will engage in a reflective exercise that combines theoretical insights with physical, embodied action. This involves creating a "positioning map" where participants physically place themselves in relation to different design perspectives (artistic, pragmatic, etc.).

Individual Mapping: Participants will reflect on their own persona and positioning by engaging with a personal object (declined through an image, the object itself, and its description). This object represents their background, identity, and relationship to the design process.

Systemic Proximity Design Framework (30 min)

Collaborative Mapping: Participants will position their own persona (as represented by the object) in relation to the other participants, exploring how individual perspectives connect within the broader socio-technical system.

Relating to the Systemic Proximity Framework: The group will collaboratively map their relationships using the Systemic Proximity framework, understanding how their personal reflections relate to systemic urban design principles.

Wrap-up and Closing (15 min)

Summary of key insights from the activities. Discussion on how the insights gathered can be applied to participants' future design work. Final reflections on embodied and relational practices in design.

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