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Special Forum: Designing a World of Many Centers

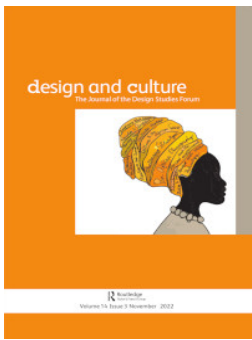
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Special Forum: Designing a World of Many Centers

Renata M. Leitão and Lesley-Ann Noel

Renata M. Leitão is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Centered Design at Cornell University and an Adjunct Professor at OCAD University.
rml273@cornell.edu

Lesley-Ann Noel is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Design at North Carolina State University. Together they chair the Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group of the Design Research Society and lead the Pivot Design Conferences.
lmnoel@ncsu.edu



What is pluriversal design? For us, the co-convenors of the Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group¹ (SIG) of the Design Research Society (DRS), it involves redesigning the terms and forms of interaction between different modes of being for mutual understanding and appreciation. A pliverse is not a world of independent units but a world based on radical interdependence (Escobar 2020; Mignolo 2018).

This special forum emerged from Pivot 2020,² a virtual conference organized by the DRS Pluriversal Design SIG and the Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking at Tulane University.³ Three authors deepened their reflections on pluriversality and submitted new papers for this special forum. Two years ago, we launched a call for papers inviting design researchers to jointly reimagine a world of many centers. We intended to go beyond the critique of modernity and colonialism, encouraging people to consider a thought-provoking set of questions: What does a world of many centers look like? What is needed to create this reality? Who is needed to create this? How does it operate? In prompting authors to respond to our call, we

recognized that it is not enough to criticize. We, as designers, must also propose new mindsets, theories, and methods that build on our critiques of hegemonic narratives. We understand that the efforts to dismantle structures of oppression must be coupled with efforts to design otherwise and generate a different world. To refer to this world, we embrace the Zapatista vision of a world where many worlds fit – *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* – that has been conceptualized as the Pluriverse (Escobar 2017; Mignolo 2013, 2018).

The concept of the pluriverse challenges a pillar of Western modernity that is universalism: the belief that we all live in a “single world,” the center of which is Western civilization (Escobar 2018; Law 2015; Mignolo 2018). Within the worldview of the single world, Western Europe and, subsequently, North America have been viewed as the main focus of what is good, innovative, and desirable (Hall 1992). The rest of the world – with its countless cultures, ways of knowing, being and doing, and ways of designing – has been considered peripheral to the dominant narrative of the world (Dussel 1993).

In the special forum, we call this apparent center of the single (modern) world “The Center.”⁴ The concept of “The Center” is positional – i.e. the assumption that design from the center is good and from the periphery is deficient – but also ironic. It implies that people who believe in a globalized single world have difficulty perceiving other forms of world-making and the innovation that is emerging from the political margins and communities of the Global South. In practical ways, this means that knowledge and innovation produced outside of “The Center” are ignored as possible valuable and valid contributions to creating futures (Santos 2014).

In our call for papers for Pivot 2020, we wanted to explicitly visualize many centers beyond the perceived center of the modern world. We wanted designers who practice “outside The Center” to come forward and share their stories, work, philosophies, and more, because they are at the center of their own worlds. Pivot 2020 was a very horizontal event with no “prominent” speakers, but with a great diversity of presenters and stories from Indonesia, India, Kenya, Brazil, the Caribbean, Australia, Uruguay, Japan, Canada, several European countries, the Middle East, the United States, and more.

Pluriversal Design

The concept of the Pluriverse became popular among designers since Arturo Escobar published *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2018), which was particularly inspired by the struggles of indigenous, Afrodescendant, peasant, and marginalized urban groups in Latin America to defend their territories and ways of being-in-the-world (models of living). Those non-modern ways of being-in-the-world tend to be nondualistic and relational; in other words, aware of the interdependence of all that exists (human and non-human). Relationality contrasts with ontological dualism – the foundation of

modernity – that separates subject and object, nature and culture, reason and emotion (Escobar 2020). Escobar describes design as a world-making practice that has been fundamental to the creation and maintenance of the capitalist modern world and asks: “can design be extricated from its embeddedness in modernity unsustainable and defuturing practices and redirected toward other ontological commitments, practices, narratives, and performances?” (Escobar 2018, 15). The papers included in this forum respond to his call for a reorientation of design theory, practice, and education.

The pluriverse refers not only to diverse “worlds” (i.e. ontologies, cosmovisions, ways of being in the world) but also to their historical oppression and marginalization by modernity/coloniality (Kothari et al. 2019). Escobar’s work has created an opportunity for people who may feel outside of the mainstream of design to situate themselves and their work. He has created a platform for conversations about many worlds, which are different from discussions about diversity and inclusion. We took advantage of the growing interest in pluriversality and have benefited from this platform to launch our Special Interest Group (SIG) within the Design Research Society and the Pivot conferences. The idea to launch the Pluriversal Design SIG was born in 2018. We wanted to create a radical space within the Design Research Society (DRS) in which we could challenge hegemony in design and discuss design from many different perspectives (other than the dominant European and North American perspectives).

We both are women from the Global South (Dr Noel is Trinidadian and Dr Leitão is Brazilian) who have settled in North America. So, we understand how difficult it is for contributions and perspectives from people of the South to be recognized by the North. Our commitment to creating a world of many centers and connections South–North/North–South has emerged from our experiences as othered “outsiders” with sometimes different worldviews from North American academia.

In the last few years, more diverse voices have been featured on the stages of *The Center*, including, for example, indigenous voices, more people of color, and from the Global South. The challenge here is not only to include people as tokens but also to embrace their way of thinking, conceiving reality, producing material culture, and organizing social life (Ahenakew 2017). Though pluriversality is sometimes conflated with initiatives around diversity, equity, and inclusion, the latter initiatives often expect plural conversations to take place within the existing structures and narratives. Inclusion and diversity do not necessarily seek to transform the current epistemologies or make other worldviews and models of life visible. In other words, the belief that we all live in a “single world” (universalism) created a world with a dominant single narrative in which the main characters are white and from the Global North. People of color have been excluded from this single storyline or played background characters (Leitão 2018). Metaphorically, inclusion and diversity are about bringing people of

color to play leading (or significant) roles in the dominant narrative of the world, while pluriversality is about recognizing that multiple alternative narratives exist and people outside of the Center are struggling to defend them and enable alternative plots to thrive. Tokenism happens when people of color are invited to play a significant character in the hegemonic narrative but are not allowed to make any contribution to transforming the dominant plot.

Our commitment to avoiding tokenism shaped the format and philosophy of the Pivot conferences. Our main goal was to invite scholars and designers who have been outside the Center to join their counterparts in the Global North in order to create connections, relationships, and pluralistic conversations. The philosophy of Pivot conferences sought to recognize the worth of experiences and knowledge from other “worlds.” This philosophy meant that we also played coaching and supporting roles for several participants so they would be able to navigate the Global North’s academic systems more easily. A few of them did not have experience publishing and presenting papers for international audiences. We strove to create alternative strategies so that practitioners and researchers from the Global South involved in the Pivot conferences would experience less of the typical barriers to knowledge-sharing experiences. We created several ways to support the Pivot participants and provide spaces in which the knowledge of presenters could be easily accessed and shared.

It is both exciting and frightening to see the explosion of the use of words like decolonization, hegemony, equity, oppression, emancipation, and liberation, not just in a fringe space. Now that people know what these words mean, we want to move people toward a place of conscious action. In this forum, we aimed to share ideas beyond a mere critique of what exists to inspire action and reframe practices.

Themes of the Pivot Conferences

Four main themes emerged from the presentations of Pivot 2020: the pluriverse already exists; initiatives and socio-technical tools for the pluriverse; decolonizing design education; and deconstructing narratives and unlearning hegemony (Leitão, Noel, and Murphy 2020). From crafts to augmented reality, from storytelling to prototypes and speculation, presenters showcased several initiatives to contribute to creating and nurturing the Pluriverse. Many contributions were case studies in which presenters affirmed that we are already living in a world of many centers. Several authors challenged hegemony in design discourses and established practices, particularly in graphic design. The theme of decolonizing design education was the most prevalent, with presenters from Latin America, the Caribbean, India, and Australia challenging the roots of design education. The congruity enabled participants to understand that they are not alone and that several people are exploring similar themes.

In 2021, we wanted to frame the conversations in a more tangible manner, inviting designers to consider the tools we create to reshape our world. The call for papers of Pivot 2021 emphasized the theme of dismantling and reassembling the structures of the current civilizational model (AKA patriarchal capitalist modernity) to convert the debris into the nurturing humus for worlds in the making. The main sub-themes were “Repairing and Repurposing as Design,” “Other Ways to Relate,” “Narratives Between Multiple Worlds,” and “Learning with the South.” In 2021, we had a strong focus on political design, as well as several papers on AI, the more-than-human, and indigenous knowledge (Leitão et al. 2021). All the sessions (keynotes and paper presentations) were recorded and are available on our website: pivot2021conference.com. The proceedings of both conferences can be downloaded from the DRS Digital Library.⁵ We hope the papers, discussions, and keynotes can inspire those seeking to decolonize their design practice and create pluriversal forms of design.

The Papers of This Special Forum

In each of the three papers of this special forum, the authors ground their guidelines and methods for design practice in ontologies and epistemologies that break with design’s modernist traditions through asserting identities, emphasizing agency, and fostering relationality.

In “From Needs to Desire: Pluriversal Design as a Desire-Based Design,” Renata Leitão invites us to reframe social design practice and methods. She works with the notion that a pluriversal design involves collaboration between people from different “worlds.” In the typical process, the designer starts with a need or problem and looks for a desirable solution. This paper suggests the opposite, engaging with desire as a starting point of an open-ended exploration and emphasizing people’s agency. Leitão proposes that desire-based design is a transformative practice that aims to break with the familiar way of doing things in order to create and recognize alternatives.

In her statement of practice, “Drawing New Futures for Design Education,” Lesley-Ann Noel invites us to reframe design education. In this essay, she wrestles with her own urge to break away from the Ulm-inspired design education of her youth. The author uses drawings as an embodied process to reflect on experimentation, change, and new possibilities for design education. These visual explorations were created, over several years, as responses to the specificities of people in the Global South. They include design education from the most “vulnerable” countries – as defined by the United Nations – as well as Freirean-inspired critical and empowering design education, design education to promote twenty-first century skills, design education inspired by Latin American decolonial scholars, and, finally, a Pan-African design curriculum.

In her visual essay, “Designing on Western Arrarnta Country: The Ntaria Digital Drawings,” Nicola St John invites us to reshape current

understandings of what it means to design. It presents the outcomes of a four-year participatory communication design education program in the Aboriginal community of Ntaria. The author encourages deeper exploration of the ways culture, knowledge, and identity are intertwined. For the Ntaria students, design became a tool for telling stories, asserting identity, and caring for the country. Their digital drawings reveal how Western Arrarnta communication design practice exists in relation to local knowledge ecologies, ontologies, systems, and kinship responsibilities.

Final Thoughts

Our main goal with the Pivot conferences hosted at Tulane University in 2020 and at OCAD University in 2021 has been to build and support a worldwide network of collaborators and allies with shared values. As the co-chairs of the DRS Pluriversal Design SIG, our work involves increasing appreciation for forms of design that come from outside the center of modernity. Hopefully, we are accomplishing the goal of creating a pluriversal design community, connecting scholars, designers, and changemakers across the South/North divide. We invite other people to walk with us on this long and enjoyable journey.

Notes

1. Pluriversal Design SIG: www.designresearchsociety.org/cpages/sig-pluriversal-design
2. Pivot 2020: Designing a World of Many Centers, conference program and videos of recorded presentations at taylor.tulane.edu/pivot/
3. We were co-chairs of the Pivot 2020 conference along with Dr Laura Murphy (Tulane University).
4. We started to use this expression at the DRS 2018 conference, when we chaired, with Dr Aija Freimane, the track “Not Just from the Centre: Multiple Voices in Design” (Noel and Leitão 2018).
5. Complete conference proceedings at dl.designresearchsociety.org/pluriversaldesign/

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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