



Designing Democratic Transitions: Research, Practice and Infrastructures for Change

CoDesign4Transitions Milan Symposium

15-16 June 2026

Bovisa Campus

Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano



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Achieving sustainable transitions is no longer only a technical or environmental challenge: it is fundamentally a democratic one. Across Europe and beyond, governments, institutions, businesses and civil society organisations are experimenting with new ways to engage publics, negotiate conflict, and reconfigure socio-technical systems in response to climate and sustainability challenges. Design has become increasingly visible in this landscape, mobilised for participation, experimentation, visualisation, prototyping and sensemaking. Yet this growing role also raises critical questions about power, legitimacy, inclusion, and the infrastructures through which design research and practice are enacted.

Organised as part of the MSCA Doctoral Network CoDesign4Transitions (2024-28), this symposium brings together researchers, doctoral candidates, practitioners and institutional actors working at the intersection of democratic design and sustainable transitions. It provides **a space to reflect on how democratic design is being practiced and researched today**, where it is taking place, and under what conditions it can meaningfully contribute to just and sustainable futures.

Rather than presenting design as a neutral problem-solving activity, the symposium foregrounds design as a situated, political and provisional practice. Contributions will explore themes such as mission-oriented innovation, experimentation in public and organisational contexts, the materialisation and visualisation of complex issues, and the role of design research in shaping practices, institutions and forms of governance. Attention will be paid both to successes and to tensions, limits and unintended consequences.

The symposium also serves as a collective moment of sensemaking for the CoDesign4Transitions doctoral network, creating dialogue between early-stage research, established scholarship and practice-based insights. By bringing multiple voices and perspectives into conversation, the event aims to advance understanding of democratic design not as a fixed method, but as an evolving field of inquiry and action embedded in wider research and innovation ecosystems.

Who should attend

- Doctoral researchers in design, sustainable transitions, political science and related fields
- Practitioners working in systemic innovation, sustainability transitions, democratic innovation, policy innovation and design
- Academic researchers in design, sustainable transitions, political science and related fields





Agenda

Day 1 | Monday 15 June 2026 | 9.00am – 6.30pm

Open event, all welcome, no fee

Timing still subject to change

8.30-9.00

Registration and Welcome coffee

9.00-10.15

Institutional Welcome – Polimi Head of Department of Design

Welcome – Symposium Co-Chairs Professor Marzia Mortati (POLIMI) Professor Lucy Kimbell (UAL)

10.00 – 11.10

Keynote dialogue

From Democratic Innovation to Sustainable Transitions: Where Does Design Sit Today?

The opening keynote dialogue sets the conceptual and political frame for the symposium by **situating democratic design within contemporary debates on sustainability transitions, governance, mission-oriented innovation and public trust**. The dialogue offered will surface tensions, unresolved questions and different disciplinary perspectives, acknowledging that converging on shared answers is not yet possible. The speakers will therefore share perspectives around: *How is design currently shaping – and being shaped by – democratic approaches to sustainable transitions, and what is at stake in this positioning?*

Speakers: Professor Idil Gaziulusoy (Aalto University) and Professor Karol Olejniczak (SWPS)

Discussant: Professor Maurizio Teli (AAU)

11.10-11.30

Coffee break

11.30 – 13.00

Panel session

Organising to deliver mission-oriented innovation

The session will explore how design contributes to the organisation, governance and coordination of mission-oriented innovation programmes aimed at sustainability transitions. It will explore: *how can design help organise mission-oriented innovation in ways that remain democratically accountable while operating at scale?*

Experts will focus on institutions, partnerships, and organisational arrangements, examining how democratic ambitions are translated (or diluted) through programmes, funding structures and delivery mechanisms.

Speakers: Adrià Garcia I Mateu (Holon), CKIC, SEI (tbc)

Chair: Professor Lucy Kimbell (UAL)

13.00-14.30

Lunch break





14.30 – 16.00

Panel session

Experimentation in Practice: Designing and Prototyping Transitions

The session discusses experimentation as a core mode of action in sustainability transitions, with particular attention to prototyping, living labs, pilots and design-led experiments. Speakers will dialogue around the main question: *What kinds of experimentation enable democratic participation in transitions—and under what conditions do they risk becoming technocratic or symbolic?* The session aims to critically discuss what experimentation does politically and institutionally: who participates, what is stabilised, what remains provisional, and what kinds of knowledge are produced.

Speakers: Jesper Christiansen (NESTA), Tomas Edman (ExperioLab)

Chair: Professor Amalia De Goetzen (AAU)

16.00-16.30

Coffee break

16.30 – 18.30

Poster session

Doctoral Research as a Site of Inquiry and Intervention

The session will offer a structured feedback space where doctoral candidates within the CoD4T network present work-in-progress as a form of inquiry into democratic design and transitions. It will explore: *how are emerging doctoral projects rethinking the role of design research in democratic and sustainable transitions?* The session emphasises dialogue, critique and sensemaking rather than evaluation, positioning doctoral research as a space where conceptual, methodological and ethical questions are actively negotiated.

Chair: Professor Karol Murlak and Professor Mariusz Wsolek (SWPS)

18.30-20.00

Aperitivo





Day 2 | Tuesday 16 June 2026 | 9.00am – 1.30pm
Closed (network only)

9.00-9.30

Welcome coffee

9.30-11.00

Feedback and sensemaking session

Sensemaking Across Pasts, Presents and Futures

The session focuses on collectively reflecting on the progress that DCs' research is making, foregrounding sensemaking as a shared practice, and helping participants situate their work within longer-term political, institutional and disciplinary dynamics. It helps DCs reconnect their research to: how do different readings of the past and future shape what we consider possible—and desirable—in democratic design today?

Chairs: Professor Laurene Vaughan and Olivier Cotsaftis (RMIT), Professor Massimo Menichinelli (ELISAVA)

11.00-11.15

Coffee break

11.15-13.15

Work-in-Progress Book Session

Researching Democratic Design for Sustainable Transitions

The session is used to work on the book contributions as a structured site for peer feedback, conceptual alignment and productive disagreement. It will focus on sharpening arguments, identifying cross-cutting themes, and clarifying the book's collective contribution to design research, policy studies and transition studies.

Chairs: Professor Lucy Kimbell (UAL), Professor Marzia Mortati (POLIMI).





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