

Imagination, Reflexivity and Agency in Institutional Change and Public Policy

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Abstract

Participatory design (PD) is increasingly embedded in public administrations and civic contexts addressing complex challenges such as climate transitions, social inequalities, migration, and digital governance. This positioning paper examines how PD operates within and in relation to institutional change and public policy through three intertwined lenses: imagination, reflexivity, and agency. Drawing on five full and five exploratory papers in the conversation on Civic Issues and Participation: Urban Matters, we analyze how PD expands civic imaginaries, enables reflexive critique of institutional relations and knowledge, and supports relational and distributed forms of agency across organisations and publics. The contributions demonstrate that PD is no longer confined to project-based interventions but is entangled with infrastructures, governance arrangements, and policy processes. Building on these insights, we sketch a future research agenda for PD that foregrounds embedded engagement, organisational learning, and epistemic justice, advancing the potential of participatory practices to contribute to more democratic, equitable, and sustainable institutional futures by working through the tensions between imagination, reflexivity, and agency in practice.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design.

Keywords

institutional change, public policy, sustainable transitions, policy design

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1 Introduction

The PDC 2026 conference takes place at a time of planetary crisis and growing uncertainty about human and ecological futures. Climate change, geopolitical instability, unequal access to resources,

and the rapid development of digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, are reshaping the conditions under which societies are governed and collective futures are negotiated. Such challenges have multiple dimensions, depending on worldview, positionality and ideology. For some people, such challenges include the future of democratic institutions and processes at different scales of governance. For others, the challenge is one of innovation, often framed as technological solutionism, obscuring the social and political aspects of such innovation. The extent of equitable, inclusive and accessible participation in such unfolding developments – whether the design of new institutional processes and structures, policies, technologies or infrastructures – therefore presents dilemmas and risks for participatory design (PD).

In this context, PD is increasingly being mobilized within public administrations and civic settings as part of efforts to address dynamic, complex and interdependent societal challenges. Municipalities and public-sector organisations are engaging with communities, professionals, publics and service users in processes that involve developing and implementing policy, designing and delivering public services, and evaluating interventions. These processes are often characterised by the need to work across organisational silos, reconcile multiple forms of expertise, and engage with diverse and sometimes conflicting forms of data and knowledge. In such contexts over the last 15 years there have been significant efforts to develop new methodological and epistemological approaches to addressing the challenges facing public administrations. These include using design-led approaches [19], deliberative democratic innovation [21, 22], co-production in public services [6], and processes of digital transformation, recently extending to artificial intelligence [17]. At the same time, public administrations are increasingly expected to respond to what has been described as a crisis of public value creation [7], understood here as tensions between institutional capacity, legitimacy, and the ability to address complex, systemic problems in ways that are perceived as equitable and effective.

The urban scale of public transformation thus offers a site-specific or contextual lens on broader issues of how such publics and interventions are imagined and created, with special reference to opportunities for reflexivity and criticality, and agency, relationality and empowerment. In this context, PD has gained visibility not only as a set of participatory methods, but as a way of reconfiguring relations between institutions, professionals, and publics [10]. However, this growing uptake also raises important questions. As PD becomes embedded within policy-making and policy delivery, service design, and innovation practices, there is a risk that participatory approaches are instrumentalised or reduced to techniques



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for implementation, rather than contributing to democratic transformation [8, 14]. This tension between institutional embedding and critical capacity is central to understanding the contemporary role of PD.

This positioning paper, and the related conversation on Civic Issues and Participation: Urban Matters, engages with these developments by examining how PD operates within and in relation to institutional change and public policy in civic and urban contexts. It does so through three interconnected lenses: imagination, reflexivity, and agency. These lenses allow us to foreground different but interrelated dimensions of participatory design practice: how alternative futures are envisioned and materialised (imagination); how assumptions, relations and forms of knowledge are interrogated (reflexivity); and how capacities for action are distributed and sustained across actors and institutions (agency). Building on this, the conversation offers new theoretical framings, critical thinking and empirical cases, highlighting some of the specificities of developing, using and understanding the impacts of PD approaches in civic and urban contexts.

At the same time, this conversation responds to a moment of heightened tension and opportunity for PD in public-sector and urban contexts, within the broader situation of unfolding planetary and democratic uncertainties. Public administrations are increasingly expected to address complex, systemic and value-laden challenges—such as climate transitions, social inequalities, migration, and digital governance—under conditions of uncertainty, fragmentation, and declining public trust. Recent work on climate neutrality at the municipal scale has highlighted the importance of aligning social innovation and strategic governance processes in cities' transition pathways [18]. Within public administration and governance scholarship, these challenges have been framed as a crisis of public value creation, calling for new forms of collaboration, experimentation, and learning across institutional and societal boundaries [7]. PD has become increasingly visible in these debates, not only as a set of methods, but as a way of reconfiguring relations between institutions, professionals, and publics in the pursuit of public value [10]. Building on these dynamics, the growing uptake of PD within public administrations raises critical questions about its role, consequences, and limits. As PD becomes institutionalized within policy-making, policy delivery, service design, and innovation units, there is a risk that participatory approaches are instrumentalized, depoliticized, or reduced to tools for implementation rather than vehicles for democratic transformation [8, 14]. This makes it timely to revisit and complement PD's theoretical foundations and empirical practices in relation to institutional change, public value, and governance. The conversation proposed here contributes to this effort by examining how imagination, reflexivity, and agency are mobilized—and contested—when PD operates within civic and urban transformations, offering insights that are relevant both to PD scholarship and to wider debates on the future of public institutions.

Drawing on five full and five exploratory papers included in this conversation, the paper develops a conceptual framing of PD in relation to institutional change and public policy, which examines how these contributions collectively advance current understandings and practices. In doing so, it highlights some of the specificities of PD in civic and urban contexts, where participation is shaped by

organisational structures, policy frameworks, and broader socio-political conditions. It does so by first outlining the three themes identified in the papers in this conversation. Then it introduces each of the full and exploratory papers to show how they illuminate perspectives for research and practice in public administrations and civic design, and for PD. The paper concludes by sketching a future research agenda for and within PD in institutional, urban and public contexts that foregrounds embedded engagement, organisational learning, and epistemic justice, and that advances the potential of participatory practices to contribute to more democratic, equitable, and sustainable institutional futures.

2 Three themes in institutional change and public policy

2.1 Imagination, expansion and creativity

Within studies and practice of PD, imagination and creativity are long-standing concerns, although arguably less dominant than other strands of thinking such as the nature of participation and its politics. With the sustained emphasis in PD on the politics of participation, such imagining and creativity are understood as political, collective and grounded in the situation being explored. Being attentive to how imagination and creativity are manifested within PD opens up possibilities to go beyond or expand existing concepts, assumptions and worldviews. For example, PD is strongly associated with the notion of “democratizing” innovation [2] or “creative” democracy [9]. Often such imagining and creativity have entered PD at the level of method. Methods or approaches such as design fiction, design games or speculative design foreground the generative and aesthetic aspects of the participation being materialized [20]. Further, design games provide structured collaborative activities that “scaffold” creativity and imaginative participation in workshops [4]. Such perspectives challenge assumptions of institutional ways of doing democracy, recognizing the multiple and varied sites and moments of interaction and participation between residents, citizens, service users and other people in relation to municipalities and public service providers. These strands of research acknowledge broader capacities associated with visualization, materialization and interpretation associated with the arts. Recognizing the imaginative and creative capacity of PD draws attention to how thinking about civic matters, municipalities and public administrations can be expanded and revitalized through PD, beyond current framings and practices. In the context of public policy and institutional change, this shifts imagination from a primarily methodological concern towards a question of how institutions themselves can be reimaged and reconfigured through participatory processes.

2.2 Reflexivity and criticality in relations and knowledge

Reflexivity has long been a constitutive concern of PD, rooted in its democratic ambition to challenge asymmetries of power, authority, and expertise in design processes [10]. As PD increasingly engages with public administrations, public services, and policy-making,

reflexivity becomes not only an ethical stance but a necessary condition for meaningful institutional change. In such contexts, participation unfolds within established organisational routines, regulatory frameworks, and professional cultures, requiring PD to attend critically to the relations and forms of knowledge that shape what participation can do [8, 14].

Recent PD scholarship frames reflexivity as a mode of institutional and infrastructural critique. Rather than treating institutions as neutral backdrops, PD engages with them as dynamic and contested arrangements—what Karasti [15] conceptualizes as “installed bases”—whose assumptions, logics, and temporalities actively shape participatory possibilities. Agonistic approaches to PD further emphasize reflexivity as a means to surface and work with tensions, exclusions, and conflicts inherent in institutional settings, rather than smoothing them into consensus [3]. From this perspective, reflexivity enables PD to expose how public problems are framed, whose interests are prioritized, and which forms of participation are rendered legitimate.

Reflexivity is also epistemic. Drawing on traditions of situated knowledge [12] and the politics of care in participatory practice [16], PD scholarship highlights how participatory processes privilege certain ways of knowing while marginalizing others. Concepts such as epistemic injustice [11] foreground the risks of reproducing exclusions even within participatory settings. Further to this, one of the relevant aspects of reflexivity in PD is that this is not intended to be a paralyzing notion or a purely critical one. Framed as rehearsal and experimentation, reflexivity in PD critically supports learning and action under conditions of uncertainty, enabling designers and institutional actors to work productively with social and organisational structures as materials for change [1, 13, 23]. In these contexts, reflexivity extends beyond design practice to encompass institutional reflexivity, where the assumptions, routines, and knowledge structures of public administrations themselves become objects of inquiry and transformation.

2.3 Agency, relationality and empowerment

Agency has been a core concern of PD since its origins, where participation was understood not merely as involvement in design activities but as a means to enable people to influence the conditions shaping their work and lives [10]. In contemporary PD and throughout its renewed ethos to engage with public administrations and policy contexts, agency has come to be understood as situated, relational, and distributed across actors, practices, and institutional arrangements, rather than residing in individuals alone [5].

PD scholarship has increasingly framed agency as emerging through relations between heterogeneous actors—citizens, professionals, technologies, policies, and organisational routines—rather than as a pre-existing capacity that participation simply “activates.” From this perspective, empowerment is not an outcome that can be delivered through participatory methods, but a fragile and negotiated achievement that depends on how participatory processes reconfigure roles, responsibilities, and possibilities for action [3, 5]. In public-sector and policy contexts, this involves engaging with professional norms, accountability structures, and decision-making hierarchies that both enable and constrain participation.

Relational accounts of agency in PD emphasize how empowerment unfolds through ongoing practices of collaboration, learning, and infrastructuring. Binder et al. [1] argue that agency is sustained when participatory processes create durable “design things” that allow collective concerns to persist beyond isolated projects. Similarly, work on infrastructuring highlights how PD can support the gradual reconfiguration of institutional relations, enabling participants to act within and across organisational boundaries over time [15]. Further to this, however, recent PD literature cautions against equating participation with empowerment. Without attention to institutional conditions and power relations, participatory initiatives risk reproducing existing asymmetries while placing responsibility for change on participants themselves. Framing agency as relational and institutional foregrounds PD’s potential to support democratic action in public policy by redistributing not only voice, but also capacity, legitimacy, and room for maneuver within public administrations [23]. This reframing is particularly significant in public-sector contexts, where agency must be understood not only at the level of individual participants, but across organisational systems, policy processes, and governance arrangements.

3 Imagination, reflexivity and agency in practice: contributions from the papers

The three themes outlined above—imagination, reflexivity and agency—articulate a rich and varied account of how PD is currently entangled with institutional change and public policy, offering a set of conceptual lenses through which to read the contributions brought together in this conversation. Rather than treating the papers as isolated cases or methodological demonstrations, these themes help to foreground how PD is being mobilized, questioned and reworked in contemporary civic and policy institutions and contexts. In what follows, we draw on these lenses to discuss the full and exploratory papers, highlighting how each contribution engages with, and at times stretches across, these thematic concerns. In doing so, we also attend to the tensions and contradictions that emerge across the contributions, which help to clarify the evolving role of participatory design in institutional and policy contexts.

3.1 Imagination, expansion and creativity

Related to the first theme, imagination, expansion and creativity, are three papers. The full paper *DDialogue: A Collaborative Framework for Cross-Sectoral Dialogue through Data* takes on the issue of engaging with varied stakeholders in a sector in understanding issues and developing responses to them, collaboratively, using plural and partial data sources. Drawing on the concepts of data literacy and data visualisation, the authors developed and tested in an Italian city a new conceptual framework based on dialogue, intended to be inclusive and deliberative in collaborative data analysis. This framework takes the form of nine sessions enabling both individual and group learning and co-creation. Such a project expands the established areas of focus within PD, by attending to the conditions that enable meaningful participation such as competing understandings of data, lack of trust or polarized politics. Rather than being part of an objective reality, data are foregrounded here as aligned with different interpretations.

An exploratory paper, *What Happens to Shared Visions? Surveying the Literature for Strategies to Preserve and Disseminate Participatory Futures* takes a different context in which imagination and creativity are foregrounded: participatory futuring. The starting point for the study is relative lack of information about what happens to the visions co-created in workshops and other participatory futuring activities. Through a systematic literature review, the authors identified common categories across visioning activities: extending the audience, offering new perspectives and motivating wider action. But they also found that often, visions co-created in workshops are not shared and used. However when they are, these visions have agency and are an untapped opportunity for researchers.

The exploratory paper *Soft Situationism and Urban Resilience: Participatory Design Against Tourism Massification* takes the case of the Lisbon-based XAPAXAPA Colab. This lab involved local residents in creating and exploring objects with vulnerable communities that challenged established social and economic thinking about the value and impacts of mass tourism. Being open to generative creativity as the team engaged with residents involved screen-printing, using stencils and sewing with repurposed fabrics. These participatory and embodied activities supported residents to reimagine their relation to the city and challenge dominant ways of thinking about tourism. Overall, this project showed how PD was able to operate both as a methodology and a political instrument towards reclaiming sustainable urban planning.

Across these contributions, imagination emerges not only as a generative capacity but as a site of tension in participatory design practice. On the one hand, imaginative practices enable the expansion of institutional, democratic and governance horizons, opening up alternative ways of framing public issues, data, and futures. On the other hand, when such practices become embedded within public administrations, they risk being stabilised, instrumentalised, or aligned with existing policy agendas. The papers therefore highlight a critical dynamic between imagination as a means of expanding possibilities and its potential containment within institutional logics, raising questions about how participatory futures can retain their transformative and democratic potential over time.

3.2 Reflexivity and criticality in relations and knowledge

Four papers in this conversation engage explicitly with reflexivity as a means of interrogating the relations, assumptions, and forms of knowledge that shape PD in public-sector contexts. Together, they foreground reflexivity not as an inward-looking stance, but as a collective and situated practice that makes institutional dynamics, inequalities, and participation itself open to scrutiny.

The full paper *Making Policy Work: Navigating Organizational Inertia Through Participatory Design* examines how participatory design operates within the everyday realities of public administrations marked by inertia, fragmentation, and competing logics. Rather than positioning policy as a fixed framework to be implemented, the paper attends to how PD practices enable forms of reflexive work among professionals as they negotiate between policy intentions and situated practice. Through close engagement with organisational routines and decision-making processes, the

paper shows how reflexivity emerges through action, experimentation, and negotiation, supporting institutional learning without assuming linear change.

Similarly concerned with institutional dynamics, *Uncovering Hidden Inequalities through Participatory Service Design: Institutional Service Failure in Public Employment Services* uses PD to surface systemic inequalities embedded in service delivery. By engaging both service users and institutional actors in an employment service in Finland, the paper demonstrates how reflexive PD practices can surface and reveal how organisational assumptions, classifications, and procedures contribute to service failures. Reflexivity here functions as a critical lens through which inequalities are rendered visible and contestable, shifting attention from individual deficits to institutional responsibility.

The full paper *Equitable and Inclusive PD for Public Services: Using Shared Reflexivity to Unpack Enablers and Limitations* foregrounds reflexivity as a shared analytical practice among designers, participants, and institutional stakeholders. The paper critically examines participatory processes themselves, questioning how inclusion, equity, and participation are framed and enacted in local public services in Finland addressing the integration of migrants. By mobilizing shared reflexivity, the study highlights tensions between participatory intentions and their effects, offering insights into how PD can more meaningfully engage with questions of equity and inclusion.

Finally, the exploratory paper *From Hermeneutical Injustice to Collective Imagining: Troubling Feminist Co-Design in Women's Health* brings a feminist and hermeneutical perspective to reflexivity in participatory design. Focusing on patient engagement in healthcare, the paper explores how dominant participatory framings can obscure lived experiences and reproduce epistemic injustice. Through feminist co-design practices, the study demonstrates how reflexivity can “trouble” taken-for-granted assumptions about participation, knowledge, and care, opening space for alternative interpretations and more accountable forms of engagement.

Taken together, these contributions position reflexivity as both a critical and a productive practice within institutional contexts. They reveal a tension between reflexivity as a means of questioning assumptions, surfacing inequalities, and troubling dominant framings, and the constraints imposed by organisational routines, policy frameworks, and professional norms. While participatory design creates spaces for collective reflection and institutional learning, these spaces remain situated within broader governance arrangements that shape what can be questioned and transformed. The papers thus suggest that advancing reflexivity in PD requires not only methodological innovation, but also attention to how reflexive practices can be sustained and legitimised within public institutions.

3.3 Agency, relationality and empowerment

Related to the third theme, agency, relationality and empowerment are three papers. The full paper *Agentic PD: Rethinking Participatory Design through a Transformative Agency Lens* connects established thinking on empowerment and agency in PD with a strand of Transformative Agency (TA) known as Cultural Historical Activity Theory. By examining two cases from educational contexts in Finland and Denmark, concepts from TA were shown to help

participants see themselves not just as co-designers but also active change agents. This combination of PD and TA foresees this approach to participation being a catalyst for democracy beyond workshops towards long-term change.

The starting point for the next exploratory paper is methodological: practically-based work to engage community members in having agency in relation to exploring and discussing their collective pasts, presents and futures. To do this, people engaged in workshops with printed copies of photos of their own community in a local archive in a municipality near Bogotá. The paper, *The Role of Figurations in Participatory Design*, uses the concept of figurations to help them understand what was going on as participants handled, cut, stitched and reassembled the photograph copies. The authors noted how agency emerged through practice, as participants began to physically modify the images that represented them and their environment. The concept of figuring helped illuminate how this practice allowed participants to reconfigure time, space and relations. One implication for workshop facilitators and participatory designers is to attend to how the conditions for community agency are generated and maintained.

The exploratory paper *The Role of Design in Post-participatory Research and in Framing Processes' Legacy* highlights what happens “after” participatory processes in urban settings. The authors propose that project legacies should be intentionally analyzed, framed, and re-assembled at the conclusion of projects, to better allow the translation of knowledge generated in the project, which often goes beyond the project’s objectives, into situated formats that are embedded in practice. The authors see this focus on legacy has having potential to counter the disruptive effects of neoliberalism.

Across these papers, agency is consistently understood as relational, situated, and unfolding over time, rather than as an immediate outcome of participation. However, this also brings into view a tension between enabling agency and redistributing responsibility. While participatory processes can support the development of capacities for action among participants, they may also shift expectations onto individuals or communities without altering the institutional conditions that constrain them. The contributions therefore highlight the importance of understanding agency not only in terms of empowerment, but in relation to the infrastructures, intermediaries, and organisational arrangements that sustain or limit collective action across contexts.

4 Towards a research agenda for PD in institutional change and public policy

Having briefly introduced each of the papers in this conversation, we discuss opportunities and risks for what we see as a growing area of research and practice, rooted in PD, oriented to institutional change and public policy in urban public administrations, alongside other scales of governance. Taken together, the eleven contributions assembled in this conversation suggest that PD is no longer operating at the margins of public administration and democratic innovation, but is increasingly embedded within the infrastructures, organisations, policies and governance arrangements through which societal challenges are addressed. This shift calls for a more explicit and ambitious research agenda – one that takes seriously the political, epistemic, and relational conditions under

which participatory practices unfold and seeks to advance equitable planetary futures through the intertwined lenses of imagination, reflexivity and agency. Below, we propose trajectories along which future research topics might develop, also building on the learnings that authors in this conversation have contributed. These trajectories are not neutral extensions of existing work, but respond to tensions identified across the contributions in this conversation: between imagination and its institutional stabilisation, reflexivity and its embedding within governance structures, and agency and the redistribution of responsibility. Attending to these tensions is essential if participatory design is to contribute meaningfully to institutional change and public policy.

Future research in PD should prioritise its engagement with public institutions as sites of imagination. The papers in this conversation demonstrate that imagination is not confined to speculative methods or workshop settings; it is enacted in data dialogues, in the co-design of professional legitimacy, in participatory futuring, and in creative resistance to dominant urban logics. Imagination is also a key to human survival and evolution, central to well-being and societal improvements. A research agenda attentive to imagination would therefore investigate how alternative futures are not only envisioned but sustained, translated and institutionalized. This has long been one of the shortcomings of design research; however, the maturity of contemporary design research could support the development of more robust and long-lasting methods to fuel imagination. This would include examining how visions travel across organisational boundaries, how they become embedded in or challenge policy processes, and how they retain their critical and democratic potential over time. In the current context of planetary crises and climate transitions, this is especially urgent: public administrations and people require not only technical solutions but new imaginaries of collective life, governance, accountability and responsibility. PD research can contribute to the development of this area by creating and validating methods and theoretical accounts that expand what counts as possible within institutional settings, while remaining attentive to the risks of co-optation or symbolic participation.

The reflexive dimension of PD also demands more systematic attention in relation to governance, justice, and power in institutions. The contributions building this conversation show that reflexivity is not merely a methodological virtue but a condition for institutional learning. However, more research is needed to examine how reflexive practices can be embedded within routine policy-making and administrative processes. These practices can include collective analysis, agonistic dialogue, and feminist troubling; and can involve studying how organisational inertia, professional norms, regulatory frameworks, and digital infrastructures shape or constrain participatory possibilities, and how these conditions might be contested and reconfigured. A stronger reflexive layer in PD also entails foregrounding epistemic justice, that is, identifying whose knowledge is rendered credible or marginal, and designing processes that create epistemic safety and accountability. In relation to contemporary public challenges, such as migration and social inequalities, reflexive PD can contribute to more legitimate and inclusive governance and institutional and democratic renewal by supporting collective sensemaking across fragmented institutional landscapes.

Furthermore, advancing PD in institutional change requires inquiring into relational and distributed forms of agency. Authors in this conversation already move beyond individual empowerment towards accounts of agency that are infrastructural, temporal, relational and collective. A future research agenda would therefore explore how participatory initiatives generate durable capacities for action within and across organisations: how professional, civil servants, community actors, and intermediaries become able to navigate constraints, reframe problems, and mobilize resources. This includes examining the role of intermediaries, activists, policy labs, civic technologies, and cultural actors as boundary agents who translate between fields and scales of governance. It also calls for attention to the afterlives of participatory processes, looking into how legacies are framed, maintained, resisted or dissipated, and how design interventions contribute to long-term institutional change rather than isolated project outcomes.

Across the three main themes identified to cluster the papers and around which a future research agenda can be speculated, a key implication and overarching dimension is the temporal and embedded nature of societal and policy impacts that PD interventions aim at achieving. This reinforces the need to understand impact not as an outcome of isolated interventions, but as an emergent effect of sustained, situated engagement within institutional and governance contexts. The contributions discussed in the papers suggest that impact does not primarily arise through the linear transfer of design solutions into policy. Rather, it emerges through sustained engagement, organisational learning, mutual accountabilities, and the co-development of framings for public problems and evaluative criteria in real-world contexts. Research embedded in municipalities, public sector departments, and civil society organisations demonstrates that PD can help shape how public challenges are understood, discussed and acted upon. Such work highlights early impacts in the reconfiguration of narratives, the refinement of participatory formats, the development of analytical tools, and the cultivation of reflexive capacities within institutions.

Finally, a future research agenda should remain attentive to limits and tensions. Participation is fragile, resource-intensive, and embedded in political economies and ideologies that may constrain its transformative potential. Design methods can never be understood to substitute political decision-making, nor can they resolve structural power asymmetries on their own. Recognizing these limits is therefore not a retreat from ambition, but a reality-check, to clarify the conditions under which PD (and design research in general) can meaningfully contribute to building equitable presents and futures. Additionally, it suggests that future research should combine theoretical development with long-term, practice-based engagement, comparative analysis across contexts and infrastructures, and critical reflection on the institutionalization of participatory approaches. In this sense, imagination, reflexivity, and agency are not discrete themes but interdependent dimensions of a research program for PD in times of planetary crisis.

These directions suggest that future research in participatory design should not only expand methods and applications, but also develop a more explicit understanding of how tensions are navigated in practice. Rather than seeking to resolve these tensions, PD may need to work productively within them, recognising that

institutional transformation is shaped by ongoing negotiation between critique and embedding, experimentation and stabilisation, and empowerment and constraint. In this sense, working with imagination, reflexivity, and agency requires not only conceptual alignment, but ongoing negotiation in practice.

5 Conclusions

This positioning paper has examined how participatory design is increasingly entangled with institutional change and public policy in civic and urban contexts. At a time of planetary crisis, democratic fragility, and accelerating technological transformation, public administrations are under pressure to address complex and value-laden challenges. The contributions gathered in this conversation suggest that PD is not simply being applied within these contexts as a set of tools, but is actively reshaping how public problems are imagined, framed, and acted upon.

Through the lenses of imagination, reflexivity, and agency, we have highlighted how PD expands institutional imaginaries beyond established policy logics; how it introduces reflexive practices that surface assumptions, exclusions, and power dynamics; and how it supports relational and distributed forms of agency across organisations, professions, and publics. Together, these dimensions point to PD's potential to contribute to institutional learning and democratic renewal. At the same time, these contributions reveal a set of tensions that shape PD's evolving role in institutional contexts: between imagination and its stabilisation within policy processes; between reflexivity and the constraints of organisational routines and governance frameworks; and between enabling agency and redistributing responsibility within existing institutional arrangements.

We therefore argue that advancing PD in public policy and institutional transformation requires sustained, embedded, and critically informed engagement that is attentive to these tensions. Rather than positioning PD as a neutral innovation method, future research and practice should recognize it as a political and epistemic practice capable of shaping how collective futures are conceived of and negotiated. Holding imagination, reflexivity, and agency together – and attending to the tensions between them – offers a way to navigate this terrain, supporting participatory approaches that are attentive to power, oriented towards justice, and capable of contributing to more equitable and sustainable forms of governance.

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