

AUTHOR:

Dr Marco Bevolo^{a,1,*},
Ilaria Rapaccini Bellini^{b,2},
Elena Fabris^{c,3}

^a World University of Design,
Sonipat, India,
^b Planet Smart City, Pune, India
^c Planet Smart City, Turin, Italy

¹marco.bevolo@gmail.com*

²i.rapaccini@planetidea.it,

³e.fabris@planetidea.it,

* Corresponding author

ISSN 2584-0282
*International Journal of Arts,
Architecture & Design,*
Vol. 4(2), July 2026

doi.org/10.62030/2026Julypaper6

Published: 31st July 2026

Received: 2nd April 2026

Accepted: 27th May 2026

Published by:
World University of Design

Social Design as a Critical Lens: A Comparative Approach to Interpreting Community Practices

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Social Design not as an applicative method or pragmatic toolkit, but as a critical analysis tool for interpreting existing practices in community development and social innovation. Rather than extending the theory of Social Design, the paper investigates insights gained by using Social Design as an analytical lens to evaluate real-world community practices, highlighting both successful examples and common failures. The paper employs a conceptual and comparative approach to explore community development benchmarks beyond the corporate realm, as identified in the existing literature. By reinterpreting these benchmarks through the lens of Social Design theory, the study conducts a comparative analysis to uncover common patterns related to participation, agency, relational infrastructures, and the creation of social value, as well as issues of legitimacy and reputation. The analysis reveals that Social Design makes a crucial distinction between practices that only simulate participation and those that truly encourage collective agency and relational value. Best practices show coherence among social practices, supportive infrastructures, and positive social outcomes. Conversely, recurring failures demonstrate patterns such as participation without agency, digital solutionism, and metrics-driven engagement. These patterns help clarify why similar community-oriented interventions can lead to vastly different social outcomes. As a conceptual paper, the study does not provide empirical validation. Future research could operationalise Social Design as an evaluative and diagnostic framework and test its analytical capacity across different cultural, institutional, and community contexts. For policymakers, designers, and community practitioners, the paper proposes Social Design as a diagnostic lens for critically assessing existing and proposed community interventions, thereby helping identify ineffective participatory models and reducing the risk of symbolic or superficial forms of engagement. The paper contributes originality by positioning Social Design as a critical interpretative framework rather than a prescriptive method. It demonstrates its value in making visible otherwise overlooked social dynamics, recurrent failure patterns, and the conditions under which community practices can generate legitimacy, well-being, and resilience.

Keywords - Social Design, Community Development, Participation, Social Innovation, Social Value, Collective Well-Being

1. Introduction

In neighborhoods worldwide, residents are invited through signage to take part in community activities, download apps, or participate in projects. New shared spaces are opened, workshops held, and digital platforms launched to connect neighbors and strengthen social bonds. This reflects a growing recognition that well-being depends not only on infrastructure but also on social relationships, mutual trust, and a sense of belonging (Wilkinson &

Pickett, 2009). The focus on community life responds to broader concerns about weakening social ties, declining trust, and increasing isolation, widely documented across societies (Putnam, 2000; Wright, 2022). Community initiatives are seen as ways to rebuild trust, foster cooperation, and address shared problems. Participation is a key principle in policy, social innovation, and local development strategies (Mulgan et al., 2007; Pawar, 2014), but outcomes vary. In some neighborhoods, residents take ownership of shared spaces and build collaborations; in others, participation remains marginal, with poorly attended meetings and fading initiatives. The same community garden or digital platform can be lively in one place and unused in another. This variability shows that participatory mechanisms alone don't ensure meaningful involvement. Participation varies: people may be invited to meetings where decisions are made elsewhere, consultations may collect opinions without exerting influence, and digital platforms may facilitate communication without building relationships.

Social Design has recently been investigated in the context of Community Management (Bevolo, Rapaccini, Fabris & Monacelli, 2026), as an extension of a case study that reviews a robust application of community management in real estate (Bevolo, Rapaccini, Fabris & Monacelli, 2025). These two publications formed a foundation for further reflections. Following these two peer-reviewed papers, the authors herewith posited that both scholars and practitioners might benefit from a sound understanding and a novel interpretation of both community development and Social Design in urban contexts, and of their mutual interrelations and potential interdependences. Departing from these lines of reflexivity, this original article therefore proposes Social Design as a critical lens for re-interpreting community practices.

Specifically, the authors do not adopt Social Design as a method to be implemented, but as an interpretive framework that helps bring into focus the conditions under which participation becomes meaningful, relationships take hold, and collective value begins to emerge, leading to the (self-) development and management of citizen communities within given urban areas. By revisiting existing community practices beyond the utilitarian principles of best practice versus worst practice through this lens, we aim to identify recurring patterns that help explain why outcomes diverge so sharply, patterns that conventional best-practice stories tend to leave in the background. Instead of prescribing “what ought to be done”, this paper will help us understand under which conditions social bonds and collective resilience can emerge and be sustained over time. Instead of asking which models work best, we should ask why the same tools produce different results in different contexts. This requires interpretative frameworks that reveal underlying dynamics, an understanding of “Design” beyond capital-driven models, and an embrace of concepts like the pluriverse (Escobar, 2018).

1.1 Social Design: reading community practices with a different lens

As Arnstein (1969) emphasized, participation without real agency is superficial, more a formality than a driver of change. Social Design helps us grasp not only what occurs in community initiatives but also why and how social bonds and resilience develop. When reduced to procedures, efforts to boost cohesion often lead to superficial engagement, creating a gap between goals and practice. As de Certeau (1984) noted, social life is shaped mainly by everyday practices rather than formal structures; neglecting these structures can create an illusion of community without fostering it. Socio-cultural practices reflect community life, while shared spaces often lack the social conditions necessary for genuine collective use. Engagement becomes a series of events rather than an ongoing process, and community is rhetorically invoked without changing daily practices. When outcomes fall short, practitioners turn to toolkits and models, assuming methods can be transferred regardless of local

contexts. However, what's less explored is how participation, relationships, and governance interact to enable or hinder collective agency.

2. Theoretical Backgrounder: Relational Infrastructures, Participation and Governance

Research on commons governance indicates cooperation occurs when institutions empower communities to organize and manage resources (Ostrom 1990; 2009). Community development studies and urban sociology research show that community dynamics stem from interactions among participation, social environments, and institutional structures. Jacobs (1961) highlighted how social interactions in shared spaces can lead to familiarity and trust, while social capital studies reveal cooperation arises from daily relations (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000). Participation, therefore, is meaningful when embedded in routine life. Klinenberg (2015; 2018) introduced the concept of social infrastructure – physical and organizational spaces that support repeated encounters – as a means of bolstering community resilience. However, relational infrastructure alone doesn't explain collective agency; governance arrangements also play a role.

Critical views reveal that not all participation leads to engagement – Arnstein (1969) and Cornwall (2008) argued that participation can remain superficial without shifts in decision-making power or conditions for sustained interaction. Overall, community initiatives are configurations of social relations, infrastructure, and governance that enable collective action. Social Design emphasises participatory methods such as co-design and collaborative practices (Manzini, 2015; Escobar, 2018), expanding design beyond objects to social systems. While participation in public policy and urban development has increased, outcomes vary widely – some communities mobilize around shared spaces, others remain passive or symbolic. Literature highlights that Social Design distinguishes between superficial participation and genuine collective agency. Successful practices, on the other hand, might be described as aligning social efforts with supportive infrastructure and positive results, while failures – such as participation without agency, digital solutionism (Morozov, 2014), and metrics-focused engagement – explain the varied social impacts of similar interventions. This might suggest that tools alone don't ensure community dynamics.

3. From Social Design as Applicative Practice to Social Design as a Critical Lens

Over two decades, Social Design has gained visibility, evolving from critiques of industrial design to a practice focused on human needs and well-being (Manzini, 2015). Recent research highlights new collaborations in addressing social needs (Mulgan et al., 2007), while sociological approaches emphasize networks, trust, and cooperation in collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These perspectives might position Social Design at the intersection of practice, theory, and governance, where design is inseparable from social relations. Indeed, it could be argued that design now shapes social interactions, institutions, and environments, extending far beyond the realms of product development or digital innovation at technological levels, reflecting more profound shifts in society and culture, from application to theory. To be precise, early design focused on form, function, and production, but as social challenges intensified, designers began to describe these as “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Design expanded to systems, services, and social practices (Buchanan, 1992), requiring inquiry engaging multiple actors, values, and perspectives.

While participatory processes can empower communities, they also have limitations, sometimes remaining superficial or symbolic, leaving power structures unchanged. Constructivist perspectives

suggest that social realities are constantly shaped through interactions, meaning communities form through ongoing negotiation. Design, therefore, explores social relations, emphasizing systemic thinking and interconnected networks of institutions, norms, and power, and recognizing that community initiatives operate within complex environments. Social Design can be described as a framework focused on shaping spaces and enabling relationships within and beyond communities, promoting participation, co-creation, and collective learning. It often appears as a backbone of co-design toolkits, participatory methods, and engagement strategies, especially where traditional planning failed to include citizens.

Ambiguities and contradictions in Social Design pose challenges. Viewing it as just “methods” can make it hard to grasp why some initiatives lead to lasting cooperation while others do not. A conceptual shift might be suggested: seeing Social Design as an interpretative framework rather than a toolkit. It then becomes a lens for understanding community dynamics, emphasizing the relational circumstances and institutional conditions that shape collective action. Concepts such as participation and relational infrastructures help analyse how community initiatives work. Instead of only evaluating methodological success, the focus shifts to how social relationships and governance influence outcomes.

4. Analytical Dimensions of Social Design

As articulated above, from a Social Design perspective, community initiatives can be understood as configurations that include social relations (among people), infrastructures (within space and place), and governance arrangements (i.e., policies and strategies). Accordingly, the analytical lens proposed in this paper examines the conditions under which participation becomes embedded in everyday practices and enables forms of collective agency. Drawing on design theory, urban sociology, and research on social capital and commons governance, three analytical dimensions are particularly useful for interpreting community practices: participation structures, relational infrastructures, and governance and collective agency. Consequently, the following analytical dimensions will be introduced as a means of interpreting community practices through the lens of Social Design:

Dimension 1: Participation structures

Dimension 2: Relational infrastructures

Dimension 3: Governance and collective agency

These parameters together help analyze and reveal how community initiatives organise relationships, distribute agency, and sustain cooperation over time. These dimensions provide the conceptual basis for the comparative interpretation of community initiatives, and, in our view, are deeply interconnected.

4.1 Dimension 1: Participation Structures

Participation is widely considered a defining element of contemporary community development and social innovation initiatives (Mulgan et al., 2007; Pawar, 2014). Workshops, consultations, collaborative platforms, and neighborhood activities are frequently designed to involve citizens in shaping their environments. However, the concept of participation itself has long been the subject of critical debate. In her influential Ladder of Participation, Arnstein (1969) highlighted how participatory processes may range from symbolic consultation to genuine redistribution of power. Later studies have shown that many participatory initiatives remain limited to providing feedback or attending events organised by external actors, without substantially affecting decision-making processes (Cornwall,

2008). For this reason, participation needs to be interpreted not only as a procedural feature of community initiatives but also as a structural characteristic of the organization of collective action. It becomes meaningful when it moves beyond isolated events and becomes embedded in everyday community life. In such situations, residents are not just invited to participate but gradually become co-producers of the social environments in which they live.

From a Social Design perspective, as Manzini (2015) argues, the most significant forms of social innovation often emerge when people begin to organize their own collaborative practices rather than simply joining initiatives designed by external actors.

4.2 Dimension 2: Relational Infrastructures

Community life is not produced solely through institutional arrangements or participatory procedures; it also depends on environments that enable people to meet, interact, and develop familiarity over time. Urban sociology has long emphasized the importance of everyday encounters in shaping neighborhood dynamics: Jacobs (1961) famously described how frequent interactions in streets, parks, and local businesses help build networks of trust and mutual awareness. These everyday encounters generate what later research would describe as social capital, the networks and relationships that enable cooperation and collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). More recently, Klinenberg (2018) introduced the concept of social infrastructure to describe the physical and organizational environments that support social interaction, such as libraries, parks, community centers, and neighborhood hubs, which function not only as service providers but also as places where relationships are formed and sustained.

From a Social Design perspective, these infrastructures can be understood as relational environments: shared kitchens, workshops, community gardens, or local meeting spaces enable residents to experiment with forms of collaboration, exchange knowledge, and build relationships through repeated interaction (Manzini, 2015; Escobar, 2018). What distinguishes these infrastructures is not simply their physical presence but their capacity to support everyday social practices. Community initiatives that generate lasting cooperation often rely on environments that make collaboration accessible, visible, and repeatable. Through these repeated interactions, casual encounters can gradually evolve into more structured forms of collective activity.

4.3 Dimension 3: Governance and Collective Agency

While participation and relational infrastructures create opportunities for interaction, the emergence of sustained community initiatives ultimately depends on governance arrangements that enable collective agency. Research on commons governance has demonstrated that communities can manage shared resources effectively when institutional arrangements enable them to develop locally adapted rules and decision-making processes (Ostrom, 1990). In those contexts, participation becomes meaningful because individuals recognize that their involvement has tangible consequences for shared outcomes. Similar insights have emerged from studies of social capital and collective action, which highlight how trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility develop when individuals perceive themselves as participants in a common endeavor rather than as passive beneficiaries of external programs (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

From the perspective of Social Design, governance refers not only to formal institutions but to the broader ways in which authority, responsibility, and decision-making are distributed among people. The community initiatives may range from top-down programs designed by institutions to

collaborative arrangements in which residents actively shape priorities, rules, and practices. The degree to which governance structures enable communities to exercise agency strongly influences the sustainability of community initiatives: when people can shape decisions and organize collective practices, participation often evolves into a sense of shared ownership and stewardship, and when participation remains disconnected from governance, engagement frequently declines once external programs or incentives disappear.

5. Methodological Approach: Comparative Conceptual Interpretation

To explore the interaction among the three dimensions mentioned above in analytical applications, a comparative conceptual framework is proposed herein. Instead of conducting empirical fieldwork, this analysis draws on comparative reviews of community initiatives frequently cited in the literature on community development, participatory governance, and social innovation. These serve as conceptual reference cases that illustrate various configurations of participation, infrastructure, and governance in real-world settings.

Comparative interpretation is common in social sciences for identifying patterns across contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By studying how similar participation aspirations are achieved across initiatives, underlying dynamics are revealed. Selected initiatives are prominent in literature, encompassing grassroots, civic governance, policies, and digital platforms. Rather than judging projects by their success, the approach highlights recurring configurations that shape participation in practice. Some initiatives align participation mechanisms, infrastructure, and governance, fostering collaboration and shared stewardship. Others show sporadic or symbolic participation, disconnected from decision-making or social practices. This allows for the examination of a variety of community practices. Each initiative is analyzed in terms of participation structures, relational infrastructures, and governance. The next section summarizes the cases through the Social Design framework, with subsequent analysis exploring emerging patterns.

5.1 Selection of Community Practices as Cases for Analysis

This section draws on a selection of community initiatives widely discussed in the literature on community development, social innovation, and participatory governance. As already mentioned, these initiatives have been selected not as representative cases, but as conceptual reference points that illustrate different configurations of participation, relational infrastructures, and governance arrangements.

The selected and referenced cases included span a range of contexts:

- everyday participation: grassroots initiatives (e.g., Repair Cafés)
- neighborhood-scale participation ecosystems (e.g., Participatory City)
- institutional governance innovations (e.g., Bologna Commons, Community Land Trusts)
- public policy interventions (e.g., Medellín Social Urbanism)
- digitally mediated participation platforms (e.g., Nextdoor, smart city apps)
- developer- or program-led engagement initiatives

This diversity allows us to compare how similar aspirations for participation are translated into practice under different social and institutional conditions. Rather than classifying these initiatives as simply successful or unsuccessful, the Social Design perspective enables their interpretation as

different configurations of community-making, revealing how participation, infrastructures, and governance interact to either enable or constrain the emergence of collective agency.

5.2 Everyday Participation: Grassroots Initiatives

The significance of environments enabling everyday participation through grassroots initiatives has long been highlighted in the field of urban sociology. Jane Jacobs argued that the vitality of neighborhoods relies on frequent informal interactions in shared spaces, allowing residents to gradually build familiarity and mutual trust (Jacobs, 1961). More contemporary research has identified libraries, parks, community centers, and local hubs as crucial forms of social infrastructure that bolster social relationships and collective resilience (Klinenberg, 2015; Klinenberg, 2018). Various initiatives highlighted in the literature demonstrate how community life can emerge when participation is integrated into daily practices and supported by relational infrastructures:

1. The Participatory City's Everyone Everyday program in Barking and Dagenham, London, provides a particularly well-documented example. The initiative established a distributed network of neighborhood spaces designed to host open, accessible activities such as cooking, making, gardening, and repairing. Instead of relying on formal participatory meetings, the program enables residents to initiate and organize activities themselves, with support from facilitators and shared spaces embedded in everyday neighborhood life (Participatory City, 2019; Manzini, 2015; Manzini, 2014). Through these repeated interactions, participants gradually develop networks of trust, familiarity, and cooperation. Participation becomes part of daily routines rather than a special event organized by external actors.
2. The Repair Café movement is a grassroots initiative where residents collectively repair everyday objects while sharing knowledge and practical skills. Scholars have interpreted these initiatives as examples of grassroots innovation environments in which collaboration emerges through shared practices rather than through formal participation mechanisms (Charter & Keiller, 2014; Smith et.al., 2014).
3. Australia's Neighbourhood Houses further showcase how dedicated community spaces can serve as meeting points for ongoing interaction and self-organized activities. These centers host locally initiated programs that range from cultural events to skill-sharing workshops, forging opportunities for residents to connect through everyday practices rather than formal participation processes (Ames, 2014). Across these examples, communities are built not just through institutional programs but through infrastructures that enable repeated encounters, shared experiences, and participation, which is not merely encouraged but becomes ingrained in the daily rhythms of life.

5.3 Institutional Arrangements Enabling Collective Agency

A second group of initiatives demonstrates how community dynamics can develop when governance arrangements trigger and enable collective stewardship and decision-making. These include:

1. The Bologna Regulation on the Urban Commons, introduced in 2014, is widely cited as an innovative example of civic collaboration in urban governance. The regulation allows citizens and public authorities to establish "collaboration pacts" for the care and management of public assets such as parks, buildings, and public spaces. Instead of viewing citizens merely as participants or beneficiaries, the framework recognises them as co-managers of urban commons (Iaione, 2016; Foster & Iaione, 2019). From a Social Design perspective, the significance of the Bologna model lies not only in the participatory processes it enables but

also in the institutional arrangements that distribute responsibilities and decision-making capacities between citizens and public authorities.

2. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) place land under community stewardship to ensure long-term housing affordability and neighbourhood stability. By separating land ownership from speculative markets and establishing community governance structures, CLTs enable residents to participate directly in decisions concerning housing and neighbourhood development (Davis, 2010; DeFilippis, Saegert, and Krinsky, 2018).
3. Medellín's Social Urbanism illustrates how infrastructural investment combined with inclusive governance can contribute to community development. Projects such as libraries, cable car systems, and cultural facilities were intentionally located in marginalised neighbourhoods to create spaces that foster civic participation and social interaction (Brand and Dávila 2011). In these cases, participation is not limited to consultation or event-based engagement but, instead, the governance arrangements create the institutional conditions through which people can influence decisions and assume responsibility for shared environments.

5.4 Symbolic Participation and Programmed Engagement

In potential contrast to the above references, many contemporary community initiatives involve configurations in which participation remains largely symbolic or episodic. These initiatives often adopt participatory language while maintaining governance arrangements that limit community agency. Urban planning processes frequently illustrate this dynamic; public consultations and participatory workshops are widely used to gather citizen feedback on planning proposals. However, research has shown that such processes often leave decision-making authority unchanged, reducing participation to consultation rather than shared governance (Arnstein, 1969; Cornwall, 2008). Digital neighborhoods and civic platforms provide another example of this tension.

Nextdoor is a platform that might be presented as a tool to strengthen local connections by enabling residents to communicate online; however, studies suggest that these platforms often reinforce social divisions or focus primarily on surveillance-oriented interactions rather than cooperative engagement (Sadowski, 2020). Similarly, many smart city initiatives promote digital participation platforms to facilitate citizen engagement: critics argue that these initiatives frequently prioritize technological solutions over the social and institutional conditions required for meaningful community participation (Greenfield, 2013; Sadowski, 2020). Another common pattern can be observed in residential developments where community engagement is organized through programmed events such as festivals, workshops, or networking activities. While such initiatives can generate short-term interaction among residents, participation often remains structured as attendance rather than as a co-production process of community life. Community becomes something to be consumed rather than collectively produced. Short-term community projects funded through corporate social responsibility programs or public grants may also fall into this category. These initiatives may temporarily mobilize residents around specific activities but often lack the relational infrastructures and governance arrangements required to sustain engagement once the project ends. Across these cases, participation is a visible organizational feature, yet the deeper relational and institutional conditions required for collective agency remain largely absent.

Table 1 below provides a visual summary of the above analysis, including all the cases mentioned alongside their key analytical parameters:

- context

- participation structure
- relational infrastructure
- governance arrangement
- observed outcome
- pattern

Table 1 is therefore proposed as a means of providing the necessary synthesis and capturing the essential findings of a Social Design-based interpretation of the above selection of cases from various fields of practice.

Table 1: Synthesis Matrix

Case / Initiative	Context	Participation Structure	Relational Infrastructure	Governance Arrangement	Observed Outcome	Pattern
Participatory City – Everyone Everyday (UK)	Neighbourhood participation ecosystem	Open participation through everyday activities	Network of neighbourhood hubs and shared spaces	Facilitated but citizen-led initiatives	Sustained everyday collaboration and local initiatives	Relational infrastructure
Repair Café movement	Grass roots community innovation	Residents voluntarily participate in repair sessions	Shared physical spaces enabling collective practices	Informal self-organisation	Knowledge sharing and community network emerge through practice	Everyday social innovation
Neighbourhood Houses (Australia)	Community hubs	Open participation in activities and learning	Community centres embedded in neighbourhood life	Locally managed organisations	Ongoing social interaction and support networks	Relational infrastructure
Bologna Regulation on Urban Commons	Urban governance experiment	Citizens engage through collaboration pacts	Public spaces managed as shared resources	Institutional co-governance between citizens and municipality	Civic stewardship and collaborative management of commons	Institutional commons governance
Community Land Trusts	Housing and land governance	Resident participation in organisational governance	Housing and neighbourhood infrastructures	Community ownership and governance boards	Long-term stewardship and neighbourhood stability	Institutional commons governance
Medellín social urbanism	Urban regeneration policy	Citizen engagement around public spaces	Libraries, public transport and cultural centres	Strong municipal leadership with local participation	Increased civic participation and urban inclusion	Infrastructure-enabled participation
Community gardens (various cities)	Urban commons	Volunteer-based participation	Shared cultivated spaces	Mixed governance models	Highly variable outcomes depending on local organisation	Conditional community infrastructure
Participatory planning consultations	Urban planning processes	Citizens invited to meetings or consultations	Limited or temporary infrastructures	Decision-making remains institutional	Limited influence on planning outcomes	Symbolic participation
Smart city participation platforms	Digital governance initiatives	Citizens invited to engage through apps or platforms	Primarily digital infrastructures	Technology providers and public institutions control systems	Low sustained engagement and limited collective agency	Digital solutionism
Nextdoor neighbourhood platform	Digital neighbourhood network	Online communication among residents	Digital platform infrastructure	Corporate platform governance	Fragmented interactions and occasional conflict	Platform-mediated community
Residents' community event programming	Private housing developments	Residents attend organised social events	Amenities and event spaces	Property managers or developers organise activities	Short-term interaction but limited community agency	Programmed sociability
Short-term CSR community programmes	Corporate social responsibility projects	Participation through project activities	Temporary infrastructures	External organisations lead initiatives	Engagement declines after programme completion	Project-based participation
Tactical urbanism / pop-up placemaking	Temporary urban interventions	Citizens attend events or installations	Temporary spatial infrastructures	Organised by designers or institutions	Visible participation but weak long-term impact	Episodic participation

Table 1 summarizes the cases discussed above and maps them across recurring configurations of participation, relational infrastructures, and governance arrangements. Rather than representing fixed categories, these patterns should be understood as analytical tendencies that help explain why similar participatory approaches may lead to different outcomes, depending on the relational and institutional environments in which they are embedded.

6. Selected Findings by Dimensions: Emerging Signals

Using the comparative interpretation method, a set of key findings and potential patterns emerges, providing a more detailed understanding of how participation, relational infrastructures, and governance arrangements interact in practice. Rather than functioning as independent variables, these dimensions appear to operate in combination, shaping different configurations of community dynamics. A synthesis based on a discriminatory reading of the findings, divided into three analytical dimensions within Social Design, is provided below. This produces a Social Design-specific interpretation of the universe under investigation.

6.1 Dimension 1: Participation: Enabling Access towards Embedded Practice

Across the cases analysed, participation emerges in significantly different forms. In initiatives such as Participatory City or Repair Cafés, participation is embedded in everyday practices and organised through open-ended activities that allow residents to contribute according to their interests and capacities. In these contexts, participation is not structured as a formal requirement but as an ongoing opportunity for engagement.

By contrast, in many institutional and policy-driven initiatives, participation tends to be organised through discrete events such as consultations, workshops, or programmed activities. While these formats create moments of visibility and involvement, they often remain disconnected from the everyday practices through which community life develops.

As a result, participation becomes episodic rather than continuous, and its capacity to generate sustained social dynamics remains limited (Arnstein 1969; Cornwall 2008). This suggests that participation alone is not sufficient to generate community dynamics; its effects depend on how it is embedded within everyday practices and institutional arrangements.

6.2 Dimension 2: Relational Infrastructures: Enabling Repetition and Familiarity

A second key finding concerns the role of relational infrastructures in shaping community outcomes. In cases where shared spaces and practices are designed to support repeated interaction, such as neighbourhood hubs, community centres, or informal gathering spaces, participants have opportunities to encounter one another regularly. Over time, these repeated interactions contribute to the development of familiarity, trust, and informal coordination. This dynamic is evident in initiatives such as Participatory City, Neighbourhood Houses, and community-based repair networks, where infrastructure is not merely a physical asset but an environment that enables ongoing social interaction.

These findings are consistent with longstanding insights in urban sociology, which emphasise the importance of everyday encounters in producing social cohesion (Jacobs 1961), as well as more recent work on social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2015; 2018). In contrast, initiatives that rely on temporary or highly programmed infrastructure, such as one-off events or short-term project spaces, tend to generate more limited forms of engagement. Without opportunities for repeated interaction, social relations remain weak and often fail to translate into sustained forms of collaboration.

6.3 Dimension 3: Governance: Enabling or Constraining Collective Agency

The third dimension concerns the role of governance arrangements in enabling collective agency. The analysis shows that initiatives differ significantly in the extent to which participants can influence

decisions and assume responsibility for shared resources. In cases such as the Bologna Regulation on Urban Commons or Community Land Trusts, governance frameworks explicitly recognise the role of communities as co-managers of shared environments. These arrangements create the institutional conditions through which participation can evolve into forms of collective stewardship and long-term engagement (Ostrom 1990; Iaione 2016).

In contrast, many initiatives, particularly those based on consultation processes, digital platforms, or developer-led programming, maintain decision-making authority within institutional or organisational structures. In these contexts, participation may be visible but does not translate into meaningful influence, limiting the emergence of collective agency. This suggests that governance arrangements play a decisive role in determining whether participation can lead to sustained forms of collaboration.

6.4 Cross-Cutting Patterns across Dimensions: Alignment and Misalignment

Taken together, these Social Design-related observations indicate that community initiatives tend to produce sustained outcomes when participation, relational infrastructures, and governance arrangements are aligned. When these dimensions reinforce one another, participation becomes embedded in everyday practices, supported by infrastructures that enable repeated interaction, and connected to governance arrangements that recognise collective agency. In these cases, communities emerge through an ongoing social process rather than as a temporary outcome of specific interventions.

On the other hand, when one or more of these dimensions are absent or weakly connected, initiatives tend to produce more limited forms of engagement. Participation may remain symbolic, infrastructures may remain underutilised, and collaboration may fade once external programmes conclude. These findings might suggest that community initiatives are best understood not as isolated projects, but as configurations of social relations, infrastructures, and governance arrangements that shape the conditions for collective action.

7. Implications for Research and Practice

The Social Design-based analysis developed in this article suggests two potential implications for both future research and contemporary practice in the fields of community development, urban governance, and participatory programs and projects, namely:

7.1 Infrastructure and Governance

The findings of the analysis suggest that the way community initiatives are assessed should be reevaluated, placing greater emphasis on relational dynamics than on purely quantitative measures such as attendance or activity counts. While these indicators offer insights, they often miss how cooperation and trust emerge through everyday social interactions, as highlighted by social capital research (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000). Recent studies on social infrastructure show that physical and organizational environments shape community resilience (Klinenberg 2018; Aldrich and Meyer 2015). Thus, initiatives should evaluate not only participation but also the infrastructure and governance that support ongoing collaboration. Future research should explore how relational infrastructures, governance, and daily practices influence community dynamics across varied contexts.

7.2 Enabling Conditions

A second implication concerns the design of participatory initiatives in urban policy and community development programs. As participation becomes increasingly institutionalized in public policy, there is a growing risk that participatory mechanisms become procedural requirements rather than meaningful processes of collective engagement. Public consultations, digital participation platforms, and event-based engagement strategies may create opportunities for involvement while leaving underlying governance arrangements largely unchanged (Arnstein 1969; Cornwall 2008). The findings of this study suggest that participatory initiatives are more likely to generate sustained outcomes when they combine three elements: accessible opportunities for participation, relational infrastructures that enable repeated interaction, and governance arrangements that allow communities to exercise collective agency. For practitioners and policymakers, this implies a shift in emphasis from designing participatory events toward cultivating the relational and institutional conditions that allow community practices to emerge. In practical terms, this may involve investing in shared community spaces, supporting local facilitators, enabling forms of civic stewardship, and developing governance frameworks that recognize people's capacity to participate in managing shared environments.

8. Conclusions

The "Social Design-based lens" proposed in this paper was adopted as a diagnostic framework for critically assessing existing initiatives. By examining how participation structures, infrastructures, and governance arrangements interact, researchers and practitioners can better identify why certain initiatives succeed in promoting collaboration while others remain largely symbolic. In this sense, Social Design provides a conceptual vocabulary for interpreting community initiatives not simply as projects or programs but as evolving configurations of social relations, institutional arrangements, and everyday practices.

The comparative interpretation method presented in this paper highlights key findings that clarify how community initiatives generate (or fail to generate) sustained forms of collective life:

- First, participation alone is not sufficient to produce community dynamics. Its effects depend on how it is embedded within everyday practices and institutional arrangements, rather than on its mere presence as a procedural feature (Arnstein 1969; Cornwall 2008).
- Second, relational infrastructures play a crucial role in enabling repeated interaction, familiarity, and trust-like conditions that are necessary for cooperation to emerge over time (Jacobs 1961; Klinenberg 2015; 2018).
- Third, governance arrangements determine whether participation can evolve into forms of collective agency, particularly when communities are enabled to influence decisions and assume responsibility for shared resources (Ostrom 1990; Iaione 2016).
- Lastly, the analysis shows that many contemporary initiatives produce visible but episodic forms of participation, remaining disconnected from both everyday practices and decision-making processes. This is particularly evident in digitally mediated platforms and event-based programmes, where engagement often fails to translate into sustained collaboration without relational infrastructures and shared governance (Sadowski 2020; Greenfield 2013).

When considered alongside the two future directions for research and contemporary practices, these conclusions might suggest that community initiatives are best understood not as isolated projects or participatory tools, but as configurations of social relations, infrastructures, and governance arrangements that shape the conditions under which collective action becomes possible. Based on this synthetic understanding, Social Design might be expected to play an increasingly key role in the design and management of communities within our cities.

References

- Aldrich, Daniel P. 2012. *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Aldrich, Daniel P., and Michelle A. Meyer. 2015. "Social Capital and Community Resilience." *American Behavioural Scientist* 59 (2): 254–269.
- Ames, Patricia. 2014. *Neighbourhood Houses as Sites of Community Development*. *Community Development Journal* 49 (2): 203–218.
- Anholt, Simon. 2010. *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4): 216–224.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bevolo, M., Fabris, E., Bellini, I. R., & Monacelli, M. 2025. Community Development as a Strategic Tool for Place Branding°. *International Journal of Design and Allied Sciences (IJDAS)*, 4 (2), 6–23. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18611507
- Bevolo, M., Fabris, E., Bellini, I. R., & Monacelli, M. 2026. Collective Wellbeing and Community Resilience: Towards a Social Design Approach. *International Journal of Arts, Architecture & Design*, Vol 4 (1), January 2026
- Bonomi, Aldo e Giuseppe De Rita. 1998. *Manifesto per lo sviluppo locale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood.
- Brand, Peter, and Julio Dávila. 2011. *Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins: Medellín's Metrocables*. *City* 15 (6): 647–661.
- Bruni, Luigino, and Pier Luigi Porta. 2005. *Economia civile e felicità pubblica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Buchanan, Richard. 1992. Wicked Problems in Design Thinking. *Design Issues* 8 (2): 5–21.
- Charter, Martin, and Scott Keiller. 2014. *Grassroots Innovation and the Circular Economy: A Global Survey of Repair Cafés and Hackerspaces*. Farnham: The Centre for Sustainable Design, University for the Creative Arts

- Cohen, Anthony P. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge.
- Coleman, James S. 1988. Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94: S95–S120.
- Cornwall, Andrea. 2008. Unpacking ‘Participation’: Models, Meanings and Practices. *Community Development Journal* 43 (3): 269–283.
- Cottam, Hilary. 2018. *Radical Help: How We Can Remaster the Relationships Between Us*. London: Virago.
- Davis, John E. 2010. *The Community Land Trust Reader*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dewey, John. 1934. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee.
- Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Eversley, John. 2018. *Social and Community Development: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2006. Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (2): 219–245.
- Foster, Sheila R., and Christian Iaione. 2019. *Co-Cities: Innovative Transitions Toward Just and Self-Sustaining Communities*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. 1999. *An Invitation to Social Construction*. London: Sage.
- Govers, Robert. 2018. *Imaginative Communities*. Rotterdam: Reputo Press.
- Granovetter, Mark. 1973. The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6): 1360–1380.
- Greenfield, Adam. 2013. *Against the Smart City. A Pamphlet*. New York: Do Projects.
- Harvey, David. 2009. *Social Justice and the City*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Iaione, Christian. 2016. The CO-City: Sharing, Collaborating, Cooperating, and Commoning in the City. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 75 (2): 415–455.
- Inghilleri, Paolo. 2021. *I luoghi che curano*. Milan: Raffaello Cortina.
- Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.
- Kadushin, Charles. 2012. *Understanding Social Networks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klinenberg, Eric. 2018. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarisation, and the Decline of Civic Life*. New York: Crown.
- Krippendorff, Klaus. 2006. *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Manzini, Ezio. 2014. Making Things Happen: Social Innovation and Design. *Design Issues* 30 (1): 57–66.
- Manzini, Ezio. 2015. *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Manzini, Ezio. 2021. *Livable Proximities. Ideas for the City that Cares*. Milan: Egea.
- Mattei, Ugo. 2011. *Beni comuni: Un manifesto*. Rome: Laterza.
- Mazzucato, Mariana. 2018. *The value of everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy*. Penguin.
- Meadows, Donella H. 2008. *Thinking in Systems*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green.
- Morozov, E. (2014). *To Save Everything, Click Here*. New York City, US, Public Affairs
- Mulgan, Geoff. 2006. The Process of Social Innovation. *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 1 (2): 145–162.
- Mulgan, Geoff, Simon Tucker, Rushanara Ali, and Ben Sanders. 2007. *Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters and How It Can Be Accelerated*. Oxford: Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 1990. *Governing the Commons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 2009. A General Framework for Analysing Sustainability of Social-Ecological Systems. *Science* 325 (5939): 419–422.
- Papanek, Victor. 1984. *Design for the Real World*. Chicago: Academy Chicago.
- Participatory City. 2019. *Designed to Scale*. London: Participatory City Foundation.
- Participatory City. 2019. *Tools to Act*. London: Participatory City Foundation.
- Participatory City. 2019. *Made to Measure*. London: Participatory City Foundation.
- Pawar, Manohar. 2014. *Social and Community Development Practice*. London: Sage.
- Phillips, Rhonda, Eric Trevan, and Patsy Kraeger, eds. 2020. *Research Handbook on Community Development*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reason, Peter, and Hilary Bradbury, eds. 2001. *Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Rittel, Horst W. J., and Melvin Webber. 1973. Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences* 4 (2): 155–169.

- Sadowski, Jathan. 2020. *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism Is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schön, Donald A. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sennett, Richard. 2012. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Simon, Herbert A. 1969. *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smith, Adrian, Mariano Fressoli, and Hernán Thomas. 2014. Grassroots Innovation Movements. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 63: 114–124.
- Thackara, John. 2005. *In the Bubble: Designing in a complex world*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Venturi, Paolo e Flaviano Zandonai. 2019. *Dove: la dimensione di luogo che ricomponi l'impresa e la società*. Milan: Egea.
- Volpato, Chiara. 2019. *Le radici psicologiche della disuguaglianza*. Rome: Laterza.
- Wilkinson, Richard, and Kate Pickett. 2009. *The Spirit Level. Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Penguin.
- Wright, Katie. 2022. *Community Resilience: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Zukin, Sharon. 1993. *Landscapes of Power. From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zukin, Sharon. 2010. *Naked City. The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Disclaimer: All authors submitting graphics to JAARD affirm that they possess the necessary rights to utilise and publish the graphics provided, thereby indemnifying JAARD against any claims of copyright infringement or other intellectual property disputes