

BUILDING RELATIONS WITH

MFA Embedded Design

Department of Design and Art

Embedded Design Guide

University of Gothenburg

NATURE BY DESIGN METHODS

**BUILDING RELATIONS WITH
NATURE BY DESIGN METHODS**
Project Documentation

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PROLOGUE

Dear fellow earthlings,

I am going to share a story, my story, your story, our story. A story about pollution, global warming, overpopulation, waste, ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, ozone layer depletion, and pandemics. And I probably could go on with this forever but, what can be radically proposed to you instead, is the need for new relations, a restored relationship with nature.

ABSTRACT

Culture, art, and design can help us as a society and for each earthling to reflect on the ambivalent relationship between nature and humans in the Anthropocene by raising the critical question of how we can build more sustainable relations with nature through design. Respectively, this project documentation informs about my graduation project within the MFA embedded design program at HDK-Valand, focusing on design, organization, and sustainability.

As a designer in collaboration with a biosphere reserve region, for the research phase, I embedded myself in their organization called REGIO and acquired relevant knowledge by conducting interviews with actors from politics, tourism, agriculture, sustainability, arts, and design. In the artistic phase, we invited individuals from and around the area of the UNESCO biosphere reserve Grosses Walsertal in Vorarlberg, Austria to a participatory design intervention. Following in spring 2022 we initiated for the first time a design camp (Nature Design Camp) and design workshop dedicated to the topics of sustainability and community to build new relations between these fields.

This documentation follows how the individual's valuable perspectives and ideas on the topics were brought together in one place through design and eventually provides findings that can be applied also in other design projects to build relations with nature and humans.

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INTRO

1.1 Building relations with nature

According to Van Horn (cited in Kimmerer and Hausdoerffer, 2021, p. 2) “your life, my life, all of our lives depend on the quality of relations between us – the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the food we become within an exuberant, life-generating planetary tangle.” As a designer with the constant ambition on how “design follows attitude” (Bauer, 2018) Van Horn’s idea immediately caught my attention and I wanted to learn more about this philosophy of belonging in a world of relations.

With embedded design (an interdisciplinary and sustainable design practice) at hand which can potentially positively impact organizations and acts in the societal context, means having the skills and methods of driving actual change forward, even within a complex and entangled system. In theory, such design practice as a change-maker can create meaningful relations and contributions to emerging environmental, social, and economic issues in the Anthropocene. The question remains though, how a design practice contributes to a sustainable relationship between nature (more-than-human) and humans (human). To that question, I need to define first what sustainability, Anthropocene, and more-than-human mean in the context of this documentation.

Caradonna (2014, p. 171) describes sustainability in the organizational context with the idea of the triple bottom line (TBL) and frames TBL the following “the idea that a business should aim for and be able to measure success in three complementary areas: economic (profits), social (social well-being and justice), and environmental (sustainability

and environmental quality).” It is important to be critical here and note, that Caradonna puts (with a very human-centered perspective) profit into the first place, then people and the planet at last. These three complementary arenas are also known to many as the three pillars of sustainability: planet, people, and profit, where I consciously put the planet in regard of a more-than-human perspective within this documentation in the first place.

According to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (2022), the term Anthropocene relates to the current age as the period during which human activity has had the greatest influence on climate and impact on the environment. With the more-than-human term, I refer to the definition of Abram (2012) describing how we humans are completely embedded within a world where animals, plants, and landscapes are as necessary as humans are to the biosphere, describing the part of the earth’s surface and atmosphere in which plants and animals can live (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2022).

I set out on an academic and practical journey to explore and respond to my self-imposed research question on how to build relations with nature through design, where I chose the design method of facilitating a design camp and its design workshop.

1.2 Building relations by design methods

The NDC aims to open up a human and more-than-human discussion for the REGIO organization, its forming six municipalities, and their alpine community. Although REGIO, its community, and other organizations have somewhat a common goal based around the UNESCO biosphere

reserve, yet critically spoken, it seems at times that some of the actors are rather interested to push through their economic and social agendas. It can be argued, that the NDC is relevant to the human and more-than-human, as its agenda and content propose to the community the need for a common understanding of how we as humans act towards nature and sets out to build new relations with our environments.

The NDC's outcomes eventually can address local policymakers to consider new ideas, concepts, and perspectives. One could say, that is exactly what you do, as an embedded designer you are facing many different societal fields and issues at the same time. It is crucial to state that, rather than taking or claiming a specific expert role as a designer, you try to embed yourself as much and sensitive as possible and benefit from an "ongoing exchange of the expert's and artist's role" (Johansson, 2020). Taken from there, I see myself within this project as a designer and mediator between the arts, environment, and science to advocate as Forlano (2017, p. 1) puts it an emerging design practice that emphasizes the interrelations between human and more-than-human actors.

THEORY

The following theoretical framework corresponds directly to the research question concerning building relations with nature by design methods and provides lenses for analysing the research. This project documentation draws on the core concepts of posthumanism, kinship, participatory design, and more-than-human participatory research. Each concept is described briefly, to understand how these theories inform the project.

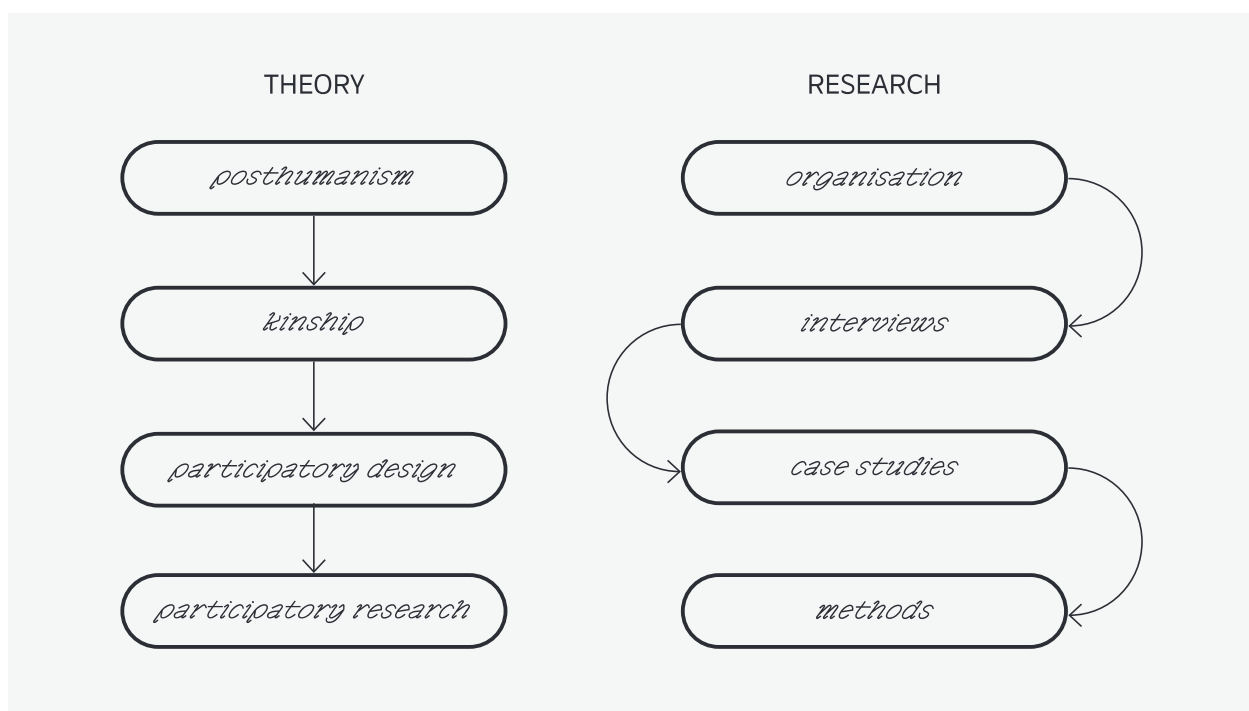


Figure 1: The theoretical lenses (left) informing directly the research phase (right)

2.1 Posthumanism

Wolfe (2010) describes posthumanism as a critical perspective where the age of humanism has come to an end by challenging humanism's assumptions of being omniscient and reasonable by renouncing the idea of drawing a dividing line between humans and the more-than-human.

A point also acknowledged by Latour (2017, p. 16) when he critically argues about the difficulty of talking about a relation to the world, which already indicates two sorts of domains, the one of nature (more-than-human) and culture (human), both different domains but impossible to separate entirely. This controversial divide between humans as subjects and nature as an object is exactly the field of discussion in the NDC's design workshop.

Posthumanism opens up a highly eco-conscious discourse as it rejects the mindset, that only humans have reason, which justifies them to take on the role of the master and decide over the fate of the planet and all its more-than-human inhabitants (Wolfe, 2010). Inspired by Laurien and Agren (2022), posthumanism and design combined can be used as theory and concept, that help us to question and challenge the universal man's often unsustainable relationships to what coexists in the living environment.

3.2 Kinship

The term kinship suggests that we live in an astounding world of relations where kinship is used as a verb to describe the ties that bind us with our fellow humans and how we share these relations with more-than-human beings as well (Center of Humans and Nature, 2021a). They provide practical examples of kinship such as the bacteria inside us, or trees exhaling the breath, we breathe claiming this community of life is our kin and for many cultures around the world, being human is based upon this extended sense of kinship (2021b). Plumwood (2005, p. 9) underlines the need for such a concept when she describes how "we humans hyper-separate ourselves from nature and reduce it conceptually

to justify domination, we not only lose the ability to empathize and to see the more-than-human sphere in ethical terms but also get a false sense of our own character and location that includes an illusory sense of autonomy.”

Van Horn, Kimmerer, and Hausdoerffer (cited in *Center of Humans and Nature*, 2021) describe further how kinship explores the deep interconnections with the living world and highlights the interdependence that exists between humans and more-than-human beings through cosmologies, narratives, and everyday interactions to a more-than-human world as worthy of our response and responsibility is acknowledged and embraced. They suggest diverse approaches which offer a wide range of possibilities for becoming better kin with the three following threads – the recognition of more-than-humans as persons, humans as relational participants in local ecologies, and the care of our kinfolk through language and action (Van Horn, Kimmerer, and Hausdoerffer, 2021, p. 7). Plumwood (2005, p. 9) adds that it is highly problematic to see the more-than-human domain in purely instrumental relationships that distort our perceptions, impoverish our relations and make us insensitive to dependencies and interconnections.

3.3 Participatory design

Participatory Design (PD) is a design methodology in which the future users of a design project participate as co-designers in the design process (Velden and Mörtberg, 2014a, p. 1). Velden and Mörtberg (2014b) argue that PD is a value-centered design approach because of its commitment to the democratic and collective shaping of a better future, which relates in this design project to the

future of the biosphere reserve. Within Velden and Mörtberg's definition, PD builds forth on the Scandinavian participatory design tradition where it discusses why the design process is as important as the final result, a product or a service (2014c). PD is based on the guiding principles of equalizing power relations, democratic practices, situation-based action, mutual learning, tools and techniques, and alternative visions about technology (2014d), all principles relevant to the NDC and its design workshop outcome.

3.4 More-than-human participatory research

According to the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the more-than-human participatory research is a project which aims to explore how a broader account of community, one that recognizes the active participation of more-than-humans, might challenge the understanding of how research can be co-designed and co-produced (AHRC, 2022a). The AHRC is concerned that the term community often only includes the human, leaving out the wide range of ways more-than-humans, contribute to the creation of a community (AHRC, 2022b). The biosphere reserve which is directly contributing to the creation of the alpine community undermines this concern. Further on it is argued by AHRC (2022c) that research is also often only understood in terms of the human, even though the research practices have always been entangled with the lives, qualities, and capacities of more-than-human actors. A phenomenon that might be also observed in the anthropological case studies conducted with and about the biosphere reserve and its alpine community. The main interest of the AHRC's project is to explore how both research and community might be rethought within a more-than-human framework (AHRC, 2022d).

PROJECT

The project process (figure 2) is divided into the following steps: collaboration, research, embedding, interviews, research analysis, prototyping, design camp, design workshop toolkit, design workshop and design guide.

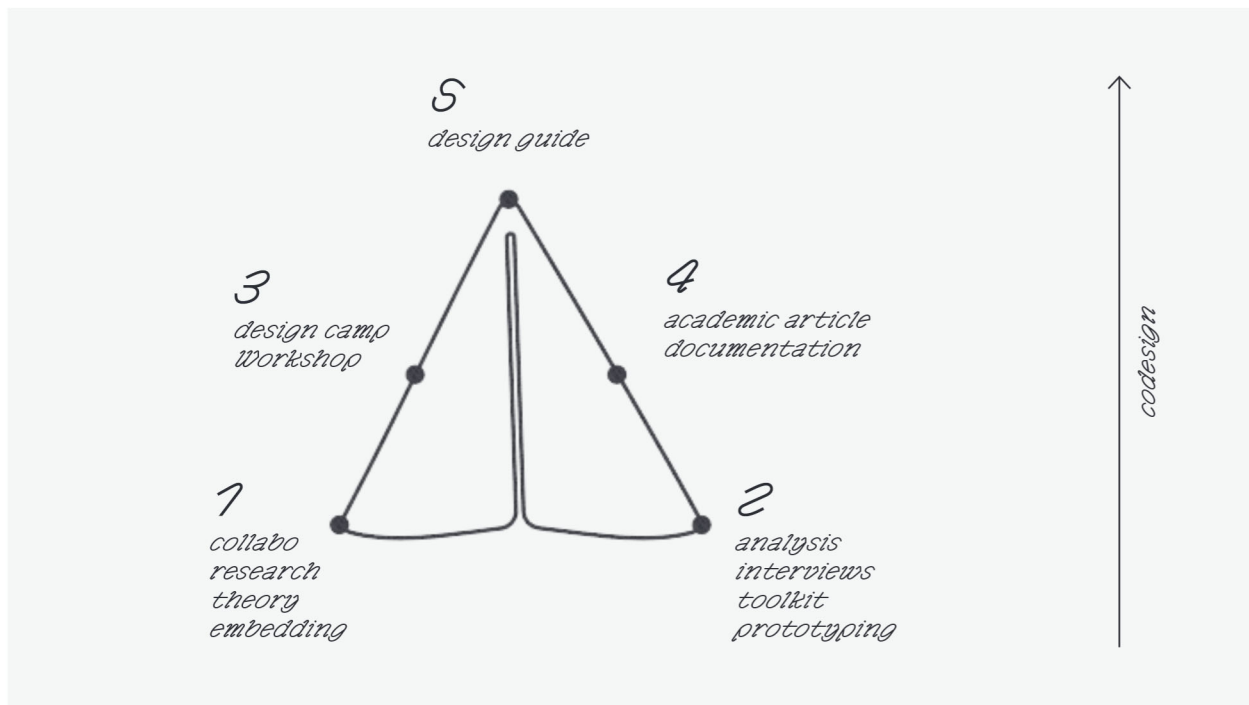


Figure 2: Project process in co-design (including organisation and university deliveries)

3.1 Collaboration

The design project was initiated with my design company Studio Matt and the REGIO organization, a team of individuals, representing the UNESCO biosphere reserve Grosses Walsertal. The igniting spark for the project was set by me and the REGIO CEO Ingo Türtscher. The collaboration takes place over nine months from January to September 2022. The design intervention itself was taking place in April 2022 on three days over the weekend.

