

Creative Dialogical Spaces for Agonism - Embodied Making and Material Dialogue in Contexts of Conflict and Transformation

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Abstract

Creative and agonistic tensions lie at the heart of democratic participatory design, yet conventional frameworks often smooth out conflict or treat it as a failure. In this workshop, “Creative Dialogical Spaces for Agonism,” we invite researchers and practitioners to explore how artefact-based methods can cultivate more generative, pluralistic dialogues that move beyond superficial consensus or entrenched antagonism. Through three contrasting stations (LEGO modelling in personal transformation dialogues; low-tech remix walls in post-conflict community contexts; and SiPRuS mapping of shared governance), participants will enact, compare, and reflect on how material artefacts mediate power, voice, conflict, and imagination over time. The rotating structure encourages dialogue not only across participants, but between artefacts, contexts, and interpretive frames. Outcomes include a collective meta-map linking methods, contexts, and dialogical modalities; practice insights and heuristics to bring back to participants’ own work; and seeds for a collaborative publication or toolkit. By foregrounding temporality, situatedness, and the messy affordances of material dialogue, the workshop aims to strengthen the theoretical and practical foothold for agonistic participatory design.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Participatory design**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Socio-technical systems**; • **Applied computing** → **Computing in government**; • **Social and professional topics** → *Codes of ethics*;

Keywords

agonistic participatory design, artefact-based methods, dialogical spaces, temporal dynamics, material mediation

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1 Motivation and Positioning

Participatory Design (PD) has long been concerned with creating democratic spaces for dialogue and collaboration. Yet in practice, many PD processes oscillate between consensus-seeking, where tensions are smoothed over, and antagonism where disagreement escalates into opposition. Both tendencies risk diminishing democratic vitality: consensus may silence difference, while antagonism can entrench polarisation and exclusion. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe’s [11, 12] theory of agonistic pluralism, we approach friction or conflict not as a failure of participation but as a constitutive and generative element of democratic interactions [4, 5].

Building on recent scholarship, we consider how design might stage, perform, and sustain productive friction. Arets and Raijmakers [1] propose adversarial design as a practice that renders disagreement visible and actionable. De Roeck and Van Dooren [3] show how the performance and staging of friction through spatial, material, and affective arrangements shape whose voices are heard and how disagreement unfolds. Related are current debates on boundary objects [9], the role of emotion and exclusion in public debates [10], embodied and participatory design scholarship [6, 7, 13], and transformational practices [8].

Together, these perspectives highlight the need to experiment with tools and methods that keep discussions open, sustain diversity in perspectives, and nurture plural imaginaries. This need aligns with one of the themes in the conversation “What is next for Civic Design?” held by the authors at DRS 2024 [2]. Civic Design “should be about creating infrastructures, or spaces, for deliberation, with room for disagreeing opinions” (p. 5). Underneath this is an understanding of collective sense-making as unfolding through making and bodily experience rather than words alone. In this view, artefacts are active mediators in participatory encounters—enabling the expression of tacit knowledge, the negotiation of difference, and the collective imagination of futures.

Building on these understandings and needs, the workshop aligns with ongoing exploratory work on agonistic contexts by the three authors, each with its own focus:

- **Creative conversation methods** in tense one-on-one interactions between social professionals and clients (*Imagination in Transitions* project, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences).
- **Artefact-based participatory design** to build trust and foster group dialogue in post-conflict communities such as Shankill, Belfast (doctoral research, Ulster University).

- **Commons-based mapping tools** supporting community negotiation over shared resources (*Cooperative Cities Agenda*, Fontys University of Applied Sciences).

Based on experiences in these projects, we propose that action-oriented artefacts—such as LEGO models, maps, prints, poems, photographs, or loose parts—can help cultivate agonistic spaces in PD. By shifting interaction from face-to-face debate to shared acts of making, moving, and creating, artefacts open embodied and imaginative dimensions of dialogue that exceed purely rational–linguistic exchange. As Di Salvo’s work [4, 5] shows, artefacts can articulate issues, provoke contestation, and materialise publics. Here we extend this inquiry by asking: *how might artefact-based methods move us from consensus or antagonism toward agonism across different interaction contexts?*

2 Goals and Questions

This workshop brings together researchers and practitioners to investigate how artefacts function as carriers of dialogue in contexts of tension, conflict, transformation, and cooperation. We explore how artefact-based methods move us from consensus or antagonism toward agonism, understanding the latter as a relational and constitutive element of everyday democracy.

Participants will experience three artefact-based methods across three interaction contexts:

LEGO in professional–client conversations Navigating life transitions (e.g., returning to work) to reshape paternalistic conversations into co-creative dialogue.

Mapping, printmaking, and loose-parts modelling Trust-building and shared reflection in communities living with legacies of conflict.

Commons-based artefacts for cooperative governance Negotiating shared management and caring cooperation in neighbourhood contexts.

The setup fosters comparative reflection across these cases, enabling participants to identify patterns in how artefacts mediate dialogue differently across contexts. The following questions guide our reflection:

- What role can action-oriented artefacts play in diverse interaction contexts?
- What qualities make them effective mediators of dialogue and imagination?
- How can PD practitioners design artefact-making processes to support agonistic engagement?
- How are relationships affected in these processes?
- What principles and skills help move beyond consensus or antagonism toward agonistic pluralism?

3 Workshop Structure

The session is designed as a three-hour, hands-on workshop combining short inputs, experiential exercises, and collective reflection.

3.1 Practicalities

- **Duration:** 3 hours (two short stretch breaks included).
- **Modality:** In-person, using analogue materials (LEGO, fragments, props).

- **Participants:** 15–30 (small-group interaction).
- **Equipment:** Tables for group work, wall space for posters and remix wall, LEGO sets, printed fragments, sticky notes, markers, poster paper.

3.2 Setup and Flow

1. **Opening and introduction of the cases (30 min).** Brief overview of the three contexts and artefact methods.
2. **Rotating rounds (3 × 30 min).** Participants rotate through three stations (A–C), each focusing on one case and method. Within each round they examine:
 - What forms of dialogue, conflict, and meaning emerge through this artefact?
 - How does the material setting or context shape what becomes visible or sayable?
 Groups engage first with artefacts left by the previous group – responding, modifying, or contesting them – so each rotation becomes a dialogue not only between people but between artefacts, contexts, and interpretive frames.
3. **Collective Reflection and Mapping (40 min).** Joint synthesis of insights across all cases and methods based on the guiding questions. Discussion addresses how artefacts perform as mediators, how situationality shapes agonistic potential, and what this implies for designers’ positionality. Participants build a meta-map linking contexts, methods, and types of dialogue/conflict.
4. **Closing Synthesis (10 min).** Shared takeaways and next steps.

3.3 Station Activities and Contexts

Each of the three workshop stations immerses participants in a specific interaction context that foregrounds different dimensions of agonistic dialogue. Groups rotate through all stations, building on artefacts left by previous participants to experience dialogue as an ongoing, material conversation. This section outlines what happens at each station.

3.3.1 Station A: Imagination in Personal Transformations.

1. **Context.** This station draws on the *Imagination in Transitions* project at the Department of Work, Participation & Income (Amsterdam), where professionals and clients engaged in conversations about life transitions such as returning to work after long-term unemployment.
2. **Method.** Participants use LEGO bricks to model a “moment of conflict or transition.” Working in pairs or small groups, each participant builds a model that represents a tension, dilemma, or turning point in their professional or personal context. Partners then remix or extend each other’s models to imagine possible next steps or resolutions.
3. **Goal and Experience.** This hands-on process reshapes potentially paternalistic one-on-one conversations into co-creative exchanges. The act of building together creates safety, shifts perceived power dynamics, and sparks imagination—allowing conflicts to surface as shared material for reflection and action.

Table 1: Overview of artefact-based methods, processes, and outcomes explored in the workshop.

Artefacts	Process	Outcome
LEGO-based methods	Reshape paternalistic small-scale conversations into co-creative dialogue.	Create safety; shift power dynamics; spark imagination.
Low-tech artefacts	Create relational and reflective spaces that surface situational and contextual dynamics.	Build trust; shared reflection; collective imagination.
SiPRuS mapping	Expose situational and context-bound norms, attitudes, and behaviour.	Foster reflection and understanding for coexisting practices.

3.3.2 Station B: Conflict and Dialogue in Post-Conflict Communities.

- Context.** This station is based on doctoral research conducted in Shankill, Belfast, exploring how artefact-based participatory design can help rebuild trust and foster dialogue in communities living with the legacies of conflict.
- Method.** Participants work with a *Remix Wall* composed of fragments from the Shankill collaboration, including prints, quotes, and maps. Each participant selects one fragment, responds through drawing or short writing, and adds their contribution to the collective wall of reflections.
- Goal and Experience.** The activity engages participants with sensitive issues of place and memory while avoiding direct confrontation. The use of low-tech, tactile media supports trauma-informed ways of holding and transforming stories. Through collective remixing, participants experience how material artefacts can carry, translate, and contest meanings across time and groups.

3.3.3 Station C: Co-designing Neighbourhood Commons.

- Context.** This activity originates from research within the *Co-operative Cities Agenda* at Fontys University of Applied Sciences, conducted in a newly developed neighbourhood in Eindhoven aimed at co-designing a sharing community.
- Method.** Participants use the *SiPRuS* mapping tool (Situation, Players, Rules, System) to visualise and negotiate over a collective resource—such as shared green space or energy infrastructure. The tool invites participants to identify actors, describe existing rules, and imagine alternative arrangements for cooperation.
- Goal and Experience.** By collectively mapping relationships and boundaries, participants reveal implicit norms, attitudes, and behaviours that shape shared governance. The exercise exposes tensions between individual and collective interests and helps surface new possibilities for care, reciprocity, and coexistence.

Across these three stations, participants encounter diverse scales and modalities of agonistic engagement—from personal and interpersonal (A), to communal and historical (B), to systemic and institutional (C). Together they form a comparative landscape for reflecting on how artefacts mediate dialogue, conflict, and imagination.

4 Expected Takeaways and Outcomes

4.1 Immediate Outcomes

- Shared experiential understanding of how artefacts mediate dialogue across contexts.
- Collective visual record (poster or wall of participant keywords and insights).
- Practical takeaways—methods and prompts adaptable for participants' own PD practice.

4.2 Longer-Term Outcomes

- Foundation for cross-context comparison of artefact-based PD methods within debates on agonism, boundary objects, and civic design.
- Basis for a collaborative publication or toolkit synthesising the approaches trialled.
- Strengthening of the network of researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of PD, conflict transformation, and civic design.
- Continuation of conversations from DRS 2024 on Civic Design across scales (micro–meso–macro) into the PDC community.

5 Intended Audience and Recruitment

We will issue an open call (May 2026) inviting researchers, practitioners, designers, and community organisers engaged in participatory or co-design practices within contexts of conflict, transition, or collective care. Participants will submit a short statement or pictorial (max 1 page) including:

- A brief description of their professional or research practice (max. 200 words).
- A reflection (max. 500 words) on how their work relates to the workshop's themes of artefacts, dialogue, conflict, or coexistence.

Creative, visual, and experimental submissions (images, collages, photographed artefacts) are encouraged. Submissions will be reviewed collaboratively by the convenors to ensure diversity in geography, expertise, and practice. Accepted participants will receive pre-workshop prompts to reflect on their own artefact-based methods or experiences. In line with PDC guidelines, all participants will register for both the workshop and at least one day of the main conference.

6 Organisers

Mike de Kreek is a senior researcher at the Civic Interaction Design research group at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS). As an action researcher, he focuses on collaborative learning processes between diverse community stakeholders, fuelled by creative and participatory methods. His work explores civic design as a means to strengthen collective agency and democratic innovation in urban contexts.

Ferry van de Mosselaer is a senior researcher with the Sustainable Urban Transformation research group at Fontys University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. He holds a PhD in social geography from KU Leuven, where his dissertation examined the role of co-creation in urban planning and development processes. His current work focuses on the intersection of design, social innovation, futures, community development, and participation.

Katrina Newell is a PhD researcher in design at Ulster University, Northern Ireland. She has a background in youth and community development through arts-based and collaborative initiatives. Her research investigates how artefact-based participatory design can foster dialogue, trust, and social transformation in post-conflict communities.

Together, the organisers bring complementary expertise in participatory design, civic design, and social transformation—linking micro-level creative encounters, community-scale collaboration, and systemic urban transitions. They have collaborated in previous international fora, including the DRS 2024 conversation “*What is Next for Civic Design?*”, and share an interest in cultivating dialogical and agonistic spaces for participatory practice.

Declaration of AI Use

The authors used AI-assisted tools including Writefull, ChatGPT, and Grammarly solely for copy editing and proofreading of the manuscript text. All original content, ideas, analysis, and conclusions were developed and written by the authors. No AI tools were used in the generation of research ideas, data analysis, or substantive content creation.

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