TRENDS GLOBAL

Conflict Transformative Design
Reframing Participation beyond Conflict Sensitivity
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Why Conflict Transformative Design Matters

Conflict emerges from **competing interests in relationships** (social, structural, environmental) and often reflecting past or present social trauma and historic and systemic grievances. CTD creates new spaces, ideas, and energies viewing **conflict as an opportunity for change**, not something negative or to be avoided. CTD promotes "the building of social capital and the long-term improvement of attitudes toward and relationships among the different (and often conflicting) social groups." It can resolve misalignment, exclusion, or harm.

Existing Approach: Conflict Sensitive Design

Design is often framed as **collaborative problem-solving**. In contexts shaped by structural inequity, historical trauma, or power asymmetry, collaboration itself can reproduce harm. **Participatory processes** that assume safe co-presence, shared power, and readiness for consensus **may silence marginalized stakeholders**, reinforce institutional dominance, or prematurely stabilize unresolved tensions. These dynamics are increasingly visible across public space planning, technology design, climate adaptation, and community development.

Identified Gaps in Participatory Design Practice

Limits of participatory and charette based design methods:

- **Mistrust or fear** exists might although co-presence is often assumed to be safe and desirable.

- Intensive, time-compressed workshops encourage alignment and momentum rather than **constructive engagement with disagreement.**

- Success is frequently measured through consensus or shared vision, rather than **attitudinal and relational change.**

- **Trauma, historical harm, and emotional safety** are rarely addressed explicitly within design frameworks.

These gaps indicate that **additional conceptual tools are needed** when the design context needs to be more than conflict sensitive to **create sustainable solutions.**

Conflict Transformative Design (CTD)

CTD **reframes conflict** as a generative and diagnostic element of design, rather than a disruption to be avoided.

Advancing conflict sensitive design, trauma-informed restorative practices, and conflict transformation theory, CTD conceptualizes **design as an adaptive, sequenced, and mediated process** that supports relational repair, inclusion, common understanding, and long-term capacity for peaceful collaboration, all aimed at strengthening **community resilience.**

Core Elements of CTD

- Contextual awareness of historical, structural, and relational dynamics.

- Reflexivity regarding designer positionality and existing power dynamics.

- Sequenced and mediated participation.

- Trauma-informed commitments to safety, trust building, and agency.

- Iterative learning that prioritizes relational capacity.

From Avoidance to Transformation

Traditional Participatory Design

Assumes safe collaboration
Emphasizes consensus
Uses time-compressed workshops/meetings
Assumes neutral facilitation

Conflict Sensitive Design

Reduces risk of harm
Manages disagreement
Uses structured participation
Has harm aware (but risk avoidant) facilitation

Conflict Transformative Design

Engages conflict as an opportunity for change
Uses a iterative, adaptive process
Expands stakeholder engagement
Creates safe spaces for conflict resolution work
Promotes restorative relational practices

Why CTD Matters for Designers?

Conflict transformation must address "the whole gamut of attitudes, values, perceptions, hopes, fears, and needs that influence and are influenced by the conflict and consequently motivate behavior." Designers must take this into consideration.

CTD recognizes that designers shape participation, power, and visibility through process design. CTD **co-creates design tools** grounded in ethical decision making, social equity, and sustainable resilience that make transformation possible.

CTD in process

- Conducting an assessment of the historical context and power dynamics

- Assessing the importance and influence of community actors

- Categorizing community actors using psychosocial theory: prosocial, proself, neutral, and antisocial

- Expanding the range of participating community stakeholder

- Using iterative processes to increase inclusivity

- Monitoring the process implementation to adapt the approach to contextual changes

CTD in Practice

In traditional design conflict is seen as a problem and the design is posed as a solution to the problem. The process is **top-down**, expert driven and linear.

CTD informed design addresses the conflict with curiosity, continuously **expanding the number of stakeholders** included in the process. Informed by history and context, CTD becomes adaptive and reflective. By using an iterative process CTD expands inclusivity and **builds social capital** by discovering and incorporating weak ties.

How designers can transform conflict

Designers may unintentionally shape conflict environments by **creating structural relationships** between people, place, information, knowledge, expertise, etc; thereby **redistributing power** through form, access, and process. CTD can help design inclusive forms, access, and processes that create positive and sustainable impact.

What disciplines can CTD support?

Public policy and governance
Public health and education
Engineering and infrastructure
Architecture, planning, and preservation
Mediation, negotiation, arbitration
and more

Why use CTD?

- Teams recognize **interconnections and interdependencies**
- They better understand **complexities and competing interests**
- They facilitate **communication and collaboration** of conflicting parties
- They integrate **diverse social, cultural, physical, and relational perspectives** in project design and implementation
- They design projects and interventions that remain **viable over time**
- They design projects that vest a broad range of local stakeholders, creating a sense of **belonging and community ownership.**

Contribution and Invitation

This work is theoretical and practice-informed. It proposes Conflict Transformative Design as an evolution of existing participatory frameworks and invites dialogue with scholars and practitioners working in public design, equity and inclusion, governance, and community development.

QR Code for more information