Article Information

Designing the discipline: Rachel Cooper's enduring contribution

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Many readers will be aware that there have been some dark days recently for The Design Journal and more widely in the field of design research. Distinguished Professor Rachel Cooper OBE, the founder of The Design Journal in 1997 and its long-time editor, sadly passed away in July. The Journal will be reflecting on her outstanding contribution to design research in depth in the months and issues ahead, but for now, we begin reflecting on her written work in the Journal in a small

way in this editorial. As board members, colleagues, editors, and researchers, we knew Rachel well. Rachel's questions were warm, open and insightful, qualities many of you will recognise through her tireless interaction and support in the design research community; whether you were newly starting a PhD programme or an experienced academic, Rachel could always find some time to help. She was a leadership coach, research mentor, committed collaborator and a friend.

Despite working with Rachel for so long, it is still eye-opening to look through her written contributions. In The Design Journal alone, she authored or co-authored 48 articles, editorials and provocations. The first of these, *'Design Comes of Age'* (Cooper 1997), Rachel opened The Design Journal by seeking to draw together nascent design research activity in areas like management, CAD and engineering into an inclusive, coherent community of design research. We see the benefits of this vision today with the scale, scope and impact of publications such as The Design Journal and others. It is interesting to see that many of the earlier papers Rachel published were focused on the foundations and definitions of design research, for example in 2013 'Design … a Well-equipped Research Domain' (Cooper 2013) and in 2017 '*Design Research: Past, Present and Future'* (Cooper 2017) where she clarified the rigour and innovation design research can bring to systematic enquiry and the broader field of research. In her later publications, there is a more wide-ranging exploration of the application of design research, including those focusing on fields such as Health, Urban Design, the Internet of Things and AI. For example, in the paper 'Why the Internet of Things needs Object Orientated Ontology' (Lindley, Coulton, and Cooper 2017), writing with a cross-disciplinary group, they explore how the highly theoretical ideas of 'OOO' can be used to inform how we make digitally connected objects as they approach intelligence. Her later papers, often in collaboration with younger academics, show a continuing curiosity and drive to explore the frontiers of design research. It is perhaps fitting that her final publication with The Design Journal is looking towards the future in a provocation '*2053 innovative product design does not exist*' (Cooper 2025). This makes the case for design as a discipline continuing to be a creative force in 2053 despite AI, biological/digital hybrids and any number of unimagined advances. Part of this confidence comes from the depth, breadth and vitality of our current design research landscape. This diversity is reflected in the range of

subjects, methods and perspectives in the papers in this edition.

Xie, Zhang and Zhu's (2025) paper 'How to define sustainable design? An exploration through bibliometric analysis and literature review based on Web of Science' analyses sustainable design through bibliometric analysis and literature review in the Web of Science database. It emphasises the importance of understanding environmental challenges and confirms that sustainable design conserves resources, and reduces waste, noting the rebound effect that can negate benefits and defining sustainability as avoiding a full rebound. Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, it highlights gaps, especially in economic and social areas. The paper proposes four traits—comprehensiveness, dynamism, propensity, and inclusiveness—as a framework for future research. It aims to guide researchers, educators, policymakers, and practitioners towards interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate environmental, economic, and social factors. The work is valuable for those seeking clarity and actionable insights in sustainable design, encouraging collaboration and integration of these dimensions into design practices, making inspiring and essential reading for advocates of sustainable development and thoughtful design.

Ruige, ZiXuan and Jie take a more cultural/historical perspective. They use a comparative case study to explore cultural factors in 'Disparities between genius loci in Western and Chinese ceremonial architecture in the Middle Ages - consider the comparison between Ming Hall and Hagia Sophia' (2025). The study critiques shallow cultural analyses in Genius Loci theory, advocating for deeper cultural engagement in cross-cultural design to preserve spiritual values. It proposes case study research and consideration of cultural components for refining the 'spirit of place' concept. The paper is distinctive in making the case for researchers and future research to explore diverse traditional buildings to enhance global architectural understanding.

Bruce Archer (1922–2005), a former Professor of Design Research at the Royal College of Art and a chartered mechanical engineer, championed systems-level analysis, evidence-based design, and field-testing evaluation within industrial design. In their paper, 'Revisiting the Systematic Method of Bruce Archer: A Review on Design as the Third Culture', Song and Wang (2025) revisit three key aspects of Archer's systematic approach—creative thinking, the integration

of design and science, and nonlinear design method/feedback—to explore the significant evolution in Archer's design philosophy. They also examine his proposition of design as 'the third culture' and the historical shifts in design methodologies. This study makes an exciting, new and comprehensive understanding of how Archer's foundational ideas have shaped contemporary design research.

In 'Novice designers in museums: A constructively aligned framework bridging formal and informal learning through artefact analysis', Aysel and Türkmen (2025) investigate how an artefact analysis framework can connect formal design education with informal museum settings. Using qualitative research methods including fieldwork and focus group, they create a practical model to improve learning transfer between museum and studio contexts. The resulting Artefact Analysis Toolkit benefits design researchers by offering a practical basis for future research and application in the crossover between design education and museum contexts.

In 'Speculative methods for exploring data ethics in food systems', Jacobs et al. (2025) explore the ethical complexities of data sharing in future food systems through design fiction and participatory evaluation. Using speculative artefacts like smart labels and packaging, the authors facilitate stakeholder reflection on a data trust model. Through Moral-IT cards and collaborative workshops, the study uncovers tensions between transparency, privacy, liability and trust. The process demonstrates how research through design fiction fosters nuanced, anticipatory ethical deliberation in complex sociotechnical systems. This paper contributes to speculative design, making the case for strategic ambiguity in design fiction, articulating how this helps expose otherwise overlooked ethical risks and assumptions in complex systems.

Demirel and Ozen Yavuz's (2025) paper 'Practicing Creative Mapping as a Method of Abstraction in the First-Year Architectural Design Studio' examines creative mapping's role in improving architectural education for first-year students. It presents mapping as more than a representational tool, viewing it as an intellectual act of abstraction linking conceptual thinking with design. Using a studio project, it shows how mapping supports cognitive development, spatial understanding, and idea creation. The study is relevant to educators, researchers, and practitioners in architecture

and design pedagogy, highlighting how mapping reveals environmental qualities and inspires design, while addressing students' challenges in translating abstraction into spatial design. This work will also appeal to those looking to enhance creativity, critical thinking, and socio-spatial awareness in architectural education.

Shaari et al.'s paper 'Elderly clothing business model transformation: A new review of the changes in service design thinking for product-service system design' (2025) offers a transformative view on the clothing industry for the elderly by tracing service design evolution within Product–Service System (PSS). It responds to the rising demand for innovative business models prioritising elderly consumers' wellbeing, shifting from traditional product-focused approaches to service systems. The study's review of service concepts, design thinking, and elements reveals three key trends—corporate-driven, customer-driven, and human-driven PSS—progressing from service quality to enriched experiences and value in human lifestyles. It proposes three service design strategies—offering, problem-solving, and value proposition innovation—guiding elderly clothing business transformation. This research is a valuable resource for designers, strategists, and academics exploring service design, PSS, and ageing populations. Its insights appeal to design researchers, business strategists, and fashion professionals aiming to better serve the elderly. By connecting theory and practice, it provides an innovative foundation for evolving service design, PSS theories, and human-centred innovations in niche markets.

In 'User-Generated Content as a Driver of Brand Value: Insights from Web-Based Marketplaces' Li and Kang (2025) investigate a contrasting dimension of human-centred approaches. They investigate how user-generated content (UGC) influences brand value on digital marketplaces like Threadless. Drawing on Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, they combine sentiment analysis and surveys to show that participation in design positively impacts purchase intention, brand loyalty, and self-concept alignment. It finds UGC not only fosters engagement and identity expression but also redefines branding as a co-creative, community-driven process grounded in emotional connection and perceived empowerment. The authors contribute to design and branding through the insight that participation in UGC platforms can transform consumers into emotionally invested co-creators of brand meaning.

Staying with UGC, 'Incorporating Designers' Ideas in Developing a Collaborative Prototype for Supporting Age-Friendly Kitchen Co-design in Chinese Gated Communities', Chen et al. (2025), determine how user-generated content (UGC) influences brand value on platforms like Threadless. Using Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model and sentiment analysis of over 6,000 reviews, it shows that participation in design enhances brand loyalty, purchase intention, and user-brand co-creation. The study highlights the key role of self-concept alignment in strengthening loyalty and offers empirical evidence on how UGC fosters community-driven brand engagement in digital marketplaces. This paper is valuable for researchers seeking to understand brand loyalty, as it specifically argues that transactional UGC platforms still foster emotional self-brand alignment, driving loyalty through identity expression.

In their paper, 'Integration of the Provus Discrepancy Model in Assessing Spatial Flexibility in Architectural Design Studios,' Bekar and Kutlu (2025) apply the 'provus discrepancy' model to evaluate spatial flexibility in architectural design studios, comparing perceptions of students and faculty. While students report higher satisfaction, faculty are more critical, revealing differing user needs. Using importance–performance analysis and risk mapping, the research identifies priority areas for improvement, particularly space organization and furniture adaptability. The model supports a user-centred, iterative approach to studio design, enhancing responsiveness to evolving pedagogical and functional requirements. One of the insights they present is highly relevant to design educators and education research is that outdoor access significantly enhances perceived spatial flexibility yet is rarely considered in standard studio design.

In our PhD article for this edition, 'From co-design to co-governance: the role of service design in supporting social governance in China how service design can support co-governance in rural China', Lin (2025) uses methods including Research through Design, autoethnography, and case studies. This work examines the evolving role of designers as facilitators within governance systems. Findings highlight the potential of participatory methods to bridge institutional hierarchies, enhance deliberative democracy, and develop context-specific frameworks for collaborative rural governance.

In his review of Silvio Lorusso's '*What Design Can't Do*', Knight (2025) describes AQ8 this provocative work as a rich, critical exploration of disillusionment in design practice. Avoiding polemics, it blends theory, memes, and visual wit to unpack everyday designers' realities. Through nuanced critique of design optimism, education, and identity politics, Lorusso offers not solutions but insight—inviting readers to 'organise pessimism'and reflect meaningfully on their agency.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). AQ6

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