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Editorial: Designing More-than-Human Climate Futures: Affect, Aesthetics and Relational Practices

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This track brings together papers that explore more-than-human design practices that generate alternative, plural, situated, and relational approaches to climate futures through affect, aesthetics, and care. Framing climate crisis as a polycrisis of interconnected ecological, political, cultural, and epistemic conditions, the track foregrounds how designers are working across contradictory, incommensurable, and unevenly recognised and experienced impacts of climate change. The included papers examine how more-than-human design can attend to embodied, felt, and sensed worlds of multiple species and digital-material entities, infrastructures, and their environments. Across landscapes, waterscapes, governance, microbial growth, and multiple intelligences, the contributions reveal both the possibilities and frictions of designing as a critical transdisciplinary practice towards more equitable, regenerative, and care-full climate futures under conditions of polycrisis.

Keywords: emotion; transdisciplinary; regeneration; care; polycrisis; multi-scalar

1. Introduction

More-than-human design research has gained significant traction over the past decade, as demonstrated by the wealth of tracks and papers presented at DRS2026. It builds on theories from various fields (Haraway, 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tsing et al., 2017; Yunkaporta, 2019) to articulate more situated accounts of design practice in interaction design, participatory design, and human-computer interaction (Giaccardi et al., 2025; Heitlinger et al., 2025; Nicenboim et al., 2024; Poikolainen Rosén, Salovaara, et al., 2024). Much of this work responds to ecological crisis by questioning human exceptionalism and



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attends to the relations through which humans, other species, materials, infrastructures, and environments coexist. Design that supports the separation of nature and culture is considered part of its long-standing problematic industrial roots. While more-than-human design practices and their associated commitments towards creating more inclusive climate futures create new opportunities, they remain entangled with industrial modernity, technocratic governance, and extractive systems (hooks, 1996; Liboiron, 2021). As such, more-than-human practices can also challenge designers as they come into tension with standardised approaches and hierarchies (Choi et al., 2026; Foth et al., 2020).

Our intention for this track was to speak to these complex tensions arising from the climate emergency. We wanted to show the ways in which designers engage with more-than-human theories and re-form their practices to address the climate emergency as a polycrisis – ecological, political, cultural, and epistemic (Lawrence et al., 2024). There is growing awareness of the ongoing emotional impacts of the climate emergency, with terms such as *eco-anxiety* and *solastalgia* explored to inform appropriate design responses (Boehnert, 2018). There are also significant longitudinal effects for those working directly with, or experiencing, the devastating and often traumatic impacts of climate through loss of land, home, family or livelihoods (Romanello et al., 2021). Despite these emerging efforts of designers and design researchers, there remain limited examples that articulate how we engage with affect in more-than-human design and with the collective aesthetic and relational decision-making practices developed to navigate this complexity (Coops et al., 2025; Lindström et al., 2024).

Drawing from Sara Ahmed (2005), we position affect here as a mode of orientation and sense-making through which bodies, spaces, and worlds become intelligible and contested, and through which the politics of spatial identities and the vulnerabilities of life can be more clearly apprehended (Morrison, 2020). Articulations of climate – change, emergency, crisis – can remain ambiguous and emotionally charged in design due to the different ways in which vulnerabilities of life and interconnected crises are framed. Not only do these circumstances challenge us as designers on how and what we know, but they also challenge our modes of being, how we are and how we act (Brosch, 2021). The scales at which polycrises unfold can be overwhelming, challenging, interconnected, and beyond even collective governmental or intergovernmental control (Morton, 2013).

Use of the terms ‘climate’ or ‘climate change’ to describe anthropocentric impacts on the planet can suggest a benign and inevitable force serving political agendas to avoid action and accountability for existing destructive socio-economic systems (Lakoff, 2010). As recent shifts in design vocabulary suggest, moving our language from climate change to climate crisis or emergency, therefore, instils a sense of urgency and the necessity of response. Yet urgency alone is insufficient: the accelerated temporalities implied here can sit uneasily with the slowness required of learning with more-than-human repair and care of regenerative systems essential for life (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Challenging distinctions between human and other forms of life relevant for questioning human exceptionalism in response to ecological devastation not only creates a crisis in knowing and being, but also a crisis in ‘human rights and values, bioethics, the environment and sustainability’ (Braidotti, 2013 p.73 quoted in Light, 2026 p.13). Care is therefore needed for our vocabulary and positionalities in how we come to frame these terms, regarding how climate is understood

and responded to: do we inadvertently position ourselves in relation to climate as something benign and beyond human control, or as interconnected and entangled with our daily lives?

As co-convenors of the track, we recognised a gap in our individual research and collective insights when scoping our position. While many designers refer to more-than-human design as inherently speaking to issues of ecological crisis, few design projects grapple with the contradictions and tensions when confronting polycrises at different scales. Our own research with communities working with, collecting, and responding to environmental data (Heitlinger et al., 2024; Westerlaken, 2025), methodological approaches to noticing and attuning to temporal, chemical or microscopic ephemera (Poikolainen Rosén et al., 2024), designing interventions and mappings that consider more-than-human exclusions (Choi et al., 2024; Dolejsova et al., 2024) and landscape scale responses to violence and oppression (Clarke, 2026), alongside conversations within and beyond academic research all highlighted the affective, aesthetic and relational practices that were emerging in response to the embodied materialities and experiences of complex agency missing in design accounts (Coops et al., 2025; Lindström et al., 2024).

We therefore invited practical case studies, discursive propositions, methodological inquiries, and speculative works that explored emergent aesthetics and affects (e.g. atmospheric, microbial, chemical, acoustic) of the climate crisis and how these might reconfigure practice towards more equitable, reparative, and care-full (Choi et al., 2023) climate futures. We asked how more-than-human designers can respond to polycrises across scientific, political, or community domains, making space for aesthetic and affective transdisciplinary exchange. We also wanted to hear from designers who support multiple affective scales and registers: from the microscopic to the body (multiple) to broader ecosystems. We have also included voices that move beyond the rhetoric of sustainability to challenge green/whitewashing and techno-solutionism. Here, we were interested in examples of practice that move towards genuinely affective regenerative practices when responding to issues such as net zero, material circularity, energy, migration, biodiversity, and systems thinking. Such examples demand that designers question existing values and resist the status quo. Finally, we invited accounts of climate design experience that actively respond to emotional urgency, despair, discomfort, grief, hope, joy, and healing practices. Across the 11 papers presented here, we present two themes: first, climate futures as affective and relational practices; second, climate learning through systems, translation and regeneration.

2. MtH Climate Futures: Affect and Relational Practices

The first thematic grouping presents papers that address climate futures through affective and relational practices of care more explicitly. The papers in this grouping pay particular attention to landscape-scale intervention, governance, and situated political struggle. Across these contributions, more-than-human design is not treated as a simple extension of concern beyond the human. Rather, it emerges as a practice of negotiating ambivalence, vulnerability, and responsibility within damaged and contested ecologies. What connects these papers is a shared attention to the ways affect is organised through place, history, law, policy, and uneven exposure to climate change.

In *'More than weeds: "Re-cognizing" designer-plant relations in the Sonoran Desert'* authors Whitcombe and Pallenez explore the plurality of feelings and unfolding relations that emerge through contested action on an invasive plant species the 'stinknet'. Their account of design interventions and awareness-raising complicates articulations of eradication of invasive plant species which populate fragile ecologies due to changes in the desert ecosystem. In *'Modes of being amid the Anthropocene: Living through the 2024 Rio Grande do Sol floods'*, Penteado and Meyer further expand experiences of collapse through interrogating experiences of flooding from Latin American ontologies to metaphors of other worldly beings: ghosts, monsters and ruins. They highlight how designers enrich understandings of what it means to inhabit crisis, accounting for a plurality of modes of being in the aftermath of devastation. In *'Surfacing wetlands through design ethnography and critical visualisation'* authors Crosby, Jones and O'Neil focus on design approaches for raising the voices of invisible wetlands in Australia by indigenous artists and researchers: the Nap Nap Swamp in Nari Nari Country, the Rippon Lea Water in Boon Wurrong Country, Melbourne and the Dyarubbin on the Hawkesbury River. Authors highlight the significance of attuning to the words and sounds created by Aboriginal communities and their connections to place as the senses activate alternative relations to water. In correspondence with data, authors highlight how critical visualisations draw attention to the lost relations that have been otherwise colonised.

In *'Imagining speculative design tools with a capabilities approach'* Lackner attempts to make visible decision-making practices and centres the politics of the more-than-human in legal, policy and governance frameworks by exploring how urban development might further develop the legal capability to consider all life affected by the built environment. Drawing on a capabilities approach to better inform speculative design approaches, Lackner discusses ways to make clearer the relational care needed to visualise benefits and harms. In *'Mediating more-than-human care: Art, design and climate and governance'*, Huybrecht and co-authors further develop insights from participatory and immersive arts practices that intervene in local governance by making visible and paying attention to affect when experiencing complex earth systems (e.g. gravity, air and geology) thereby drawing attention to climate concerns and their politics in Europe, UK and Japan. In doing so they illustrate the intermediary mechanisms, temporalities and modes of embodiment that design surfaces to develop a critical politics of care. In *'Wet' policy making: Exploring the potential of open-water swimming in agonistically designing affective environmental governance'*, authors Obukhova, Boon and Huybrechts further the political scope by proposing a mode of 'wet' policymaking that moves towards affective forms of political engagement, which is embodied and made visible through practices such as open-water swimming. Drawing from fieldwork in Flanders, the authors highlight the potential for embodied public forms of being with water (such as swimming) to offer opportunities for civic design experiments.

The papers from this thematic grouping demonstrate a commitment to places, histories and cultures necessary for more-than-human design. These commitments help move beyond abstract theories and emplace designers in relation to geographies that demand deep forms of critical attention and negotiation.

3. MtH Climate Learning: Systems, Translation and Regeneration

The second thematic grouping turns from landscape-scale intervention towards pedagogical, methodological, and material practices of climate learning. Papers range from researchers inquiring into their own learning, approaches and technologies, students engaging in material articulation of climate concerns to young children playing with regenerative systems through decay. These papers embody learning practices through the complexities of systems thinking and making through multiple intelligences, the creative practice of noticing, the complexities of translation through poetry. They also provide opportunities for regenerative and circular design through care-full material engagements that cultivate life and reconstitute remnants and waste.

In *'Materialising ecologies of intelligences: Learning to design with and within more-than-human systems'*, authors McAra, Prosser and Ross support master's students to work with academics, communities and local organisations to design across different intelligences including ecological, human, technological, in order to accommodate future polycrises. These authors argue for a place-based transdisciplinary systems learning. Materials are key for preparing students for designing with ecologies of intelligences to support the next generation of graduates and design professionals. In *'An autoethnographic account of noticing in practice, through a more-than-human centred lens'* Breen and Stevens-Wood illustrates the negotiation of challenges and contradictions of engaging methodologically with approaches for attuning to 'river-time' with the River Taff in Cardiff, Wales. The paper highlights the complexities inherent in the use of technologies and scientific knowledge within autoethnography, while seeking to engage with alternative temporalities and the ethics of working with non-human participants. In *'Translating natures' emotions: Building an affective design framework rooted in classical Chinese poetry'*, Yi and colleagues further expand the vocabulary of emotion and affect considered relevant for designers associated with other species, through the use of Chinese 'Ci' poetry. These authors present a grounded theory analysis of Ci poems that surface deep sensory affects to develop a cross-cultural design framework that aims to move beyond anthropocentric projection.

The paper *'Co-creating with fungi: Mycelium toys and pedagogies for regenerative futures'* by Mameli and Ilman turns to material innovation in order to expand young learners' engagement with regenerative practices through playful use of mycelium structures. Here, the authors draw attention to the role of decay and agency of mycelium as a collaborator. While mycelium is considered a more sustainable alternative to the problematic development and permanency of plastic toys, the authors argue for the need for a pedagogy of living materials. In *'From fragile remnants to regenerative systems: Circular design through eggshell waste'* Goudarzi and Clifford further contribute insight into how regenerative practices focusing on eggshells – an abundant but problematic organic waste material – can be repositioned from a waste commodity to an evolving participant. The authors consider renewal as key to revaluing waste as a generative offering through context-specific, situated low-energy processes in India and Europe. By focusing on decay, renewal, and the agencies of organic materials these papers show how more-than-human participatory practices help to rethink systems through recomposition and collaboration.

4. Conclusion

Our track broadens the current climate futures discourse in design by foregrounding affect, aesthetics, and care as central rather than peripheral to more-than-human practice. Alongside humans, other living entities respond to changing environments, and their modes of doing can activate new forms of relations and care, giving rise to new design modalities. This rich collection of papers demonstrates that more-than-human practice requires designers to continue learning to attend, relate, and respond within worlds marked by plurality, asymmetry, and interdependence. It also calls for articulation of more-than-human futures across multiple scales and domains, from landscapes and living materials to governance processes and pedagogy.

As we conclude the editorial for our selected papers, we are also mindful of the inherent overlaps between fragile ecologies and conflict-affected geographies shaped by ongoing violence and oppression (Bergman, 2025) conditions that are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore within contemporary climate discourse. Escalating conflicts over the materialities of resources, land, and power affect all ways of being and life, including how we operate across research, design, and education. Our hope for the track is not to flatten the interconnected significance of these ongoing impacts; rather, we hope to open discussions about how more-than-human research and design can be undertaken in relation to intensifying climate narratives, in ways that do not erode longitudinal local knowledges in favour of political agendas for large-scale change. This includes formulating nuanced reflections on the multiple forms of violence that can sometimes underpin pro-climate agendas.

As our collection of papers attests, changes to the climate are inseparable from long histories of exploitation, extraction, and uneven development, and are interconnected with social, economic, and cultural shifts. Therefore, there is a growing recognition that design must continue to engage with the polycrisis as it unfolds, requiring transdisciplinary ways of working and plural ways of being. More-than-human designers are well placed to engage with these complex entanglements, but only where they remain accountable to local knowledges, diverse value systems, and the multiple human and other-than-human actors through which collective futures are shaped.

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