

DESIGNING A DESIGN CONFERENCE: INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ORGANISING CUMULUS BUDAPEST 2024.

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ABSTRACT | Reflecting on the organisation of the Cumulus Budapest 2024 conference provides a valuable opportunity to summarise efforts, distil key takeaways, and share insights gained from the process. Coordinating such a large-scale, international event required meticulous planning, adaptability, and collaboration across various organisational units of the host university, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest. It also required close collaboration with the Cumulus Association and the leadership of a large team across institutions. Sharing details of the submission, review, and organisation process; examining participant feedback; summarising what worked well; identifying areas for improvement; and listing practical recommendations for future conference organisers aim to document and share learnings within the Cumulus network and beyond.

1. Introduction

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME) is a design university in the capital of Hungary, and one of the most prominent institutions in the Central-Eastern Europe region. While building on its 143-year legacy, the university has completely renewed its physical environment in the last decade. The new campus, which opened in 2019, provides the community and visitors with some of the most modern institutional infrastructure in the region. The university also aims to be the first carbon-neutral university in Hungary.

Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design was the semi-annual conference of the Cumulus Association, hosted by MOME from May 15–17, 2024. The event, which welcomed over 600 participants, was the largest international gathering ever hosted by the university and represented an unprecedented organisational effort.

Describing details of the organisation, submission and peer review processes, documenting challenges encountered through the process, sharing participant feedback and offering practical recommendations can benefit future conference organisers within the Cumulus network and beyond.

2. Organisation Process

The organisation of Cumulus Budapest 2024 started with alignment on strategic goals, refining the conference theme and defining tracks, logistical and spatial planning, setting up a dedicated team, and focusing on creating a rich conference experience.

Initial efforts centred on establishing strategic objectives with university leadership, guiding the event's overarching purpose, and ensuring support across MOME departments and functions. Addressing logistical and spatial constraints was essential, particularly given the academic semester timing and the venue limitations of the MOME Campus. For instance, working with the largest auditorium, which has a maximum capacity of 200, and managing catering for over 450 participants without disrupting the event schedule presented challenges that needed to be addressed upfront.

Pre-mortem sessions identified potential challenges early on, while feedback from previous organisers offered valuable insights to refine the planning process.



Figure 1–2. Master building and main entrance at Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, during the Cumulus Budapest 2024 conference. Photos: Máté Lakos.

2.1 Aligning Strategic Goals

The most important first step in organising the conference was to align strategic goals with the university leadership. This provided a baseline for our planning activities and decision-making throughout the organisation process. This was especially important because the undertaking required all MOME departments — Academia, Innovation Center, Doctoral School, Tech Park — and all functions — Brand Office, Campus, HR, Procurement, and Finance teams — to work orchestrated.

Strategic goals that were agreed upon by the university leadership and the core organising team:

- Provide a good conference experience
- Adhere to Cumulus Association requirements
- Adhere to academic conference principles
- Add local flavour
- Bring in local/peripheral perspectives
- Highlight MOME transition (2014–)
- Celebrate the new MOME campus, renewed in 2019
- Promote English master programs
- Introduce the ongoing transformation of the university
- Present the current and future rectors
- Raise the international visibility of MOME and Budapest
- Elevate MOME and local speakers
- Generate visibility of Cumulus Budapest 2024 beyond the in-person participants.

2.2 Logistics and Spatial Constraints

Regarding the timing of the event, the only viable option for a conference of this scale to be held on the MOME campus was to hold it during preparation week — the week directly after all semester classes end and before students present their work and the exams and diploma presentations begin. This scheduling allowed rooms, both auditoriums and seminar rooms, otherwise occupied, to be utilised for the conference. The obvious downside of this timing was that students, busy finalising their semester projects, were not available to join the conference as participants or volunteers.

Critical bottlenecks were identified in terms of available space, specifically the size of the main auditorium, the available rooms to host parallel sessions, and the space that could host catering for nearly 500 onsite participants.

The main auditorium in the Master Building, the largest on campus, has a maximum seating capacity of 200 people. Anticipating a larger number of onsite participants, the organising team decided to stream the plenary sessions to additional rooms, allowing those unable to fit in the auditorium to watch the talks in real-time. While it was not ideal for some in-person attendees to watch the sessions via live stream rather than experiencing them directly, this solution ensured that everyone could view the busiest plenary sessions —including interested MOME faculty members and students both in the additional rooms and online. It also enabled the event to remain on campus, which was an important strategic objective aimed at showcasing the venue.

An important question was on setting time and space constraints for parallel sessions. As seen later, nine thematic tracks were proposed, but it was understood that they do not need to run all parallel. Next to the main auditorium, six rooms were booked for parallel sessions, and six seminar rooms were booked for workshops, Cumulus Working Group meetings, and format X sessions. Additional rooms were reserved for impromptu meetings, interviewing, and video shooting. The available rooms and a preliminary programme schedule allowed the core organising team to define how many parallel sessions, and how many paper and slide deck presentations could physically fit into the timeframe of the 3-day event.

2.3 Pre-mortem

Three pre-mortem sessions were held: one with the university leadership, the second with track chairs, and the third with the organising team. In this session, potential risks and challenges that could occur were identified. For instance, it was highlighted that construction work and noisy garden work (e.g., lawnmowing) could easily destroy the participant experience. Some of these issues might seem banal, but discovering and managing such risks early on allowed the organising team to build the necessary support across the university.

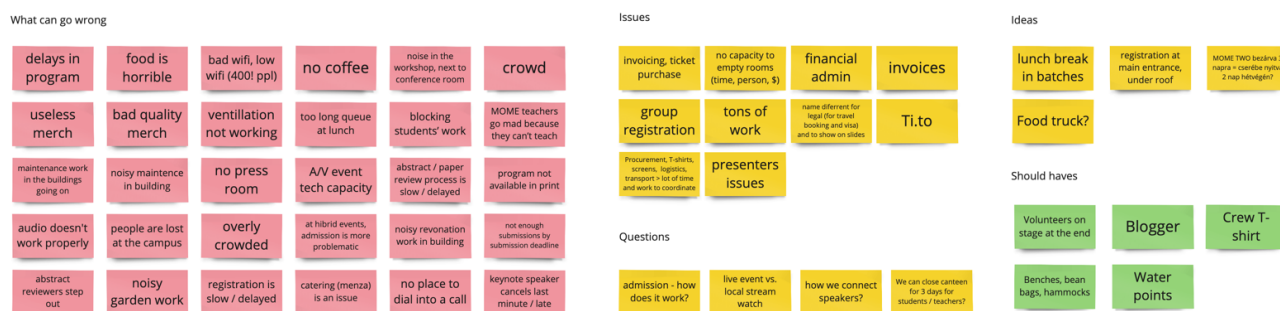


Figure 3. Combined outcomes of the three pre-mortem workshops.

2.4 Collecting Feedback from Previous Organisers

Requirements for the conference were provided by the Cumulus Association and regular meetings were organised between the organising team and Cumulus Association secretariat.

Some members of the organising team attended the Cumulus Antwerp 2023 and the Cumulus Beijing 2023 events, which provided valuable insight into the scale and organisational nuances of such an event.

Additionally, discussions with previous conference organisers, including Kristof Vaes (University of Antwerp), Maria Luisa Rossi (College for Creative Studies, Detroit), and Lorenzo Imbesi and Viktor Malakuczi (Sapienza University of Rome), proved to be immensely helpful.

2.5 Team Setup

After successfully earning the opportunity to host the event, organisational work commenced in July 2023 with the appointment of Attila Bujdosó as conference chair and Andrea Kovács as project manager and curator. Their initial tasks included drafting an organisational chart for the event, as shown in Figure 4.

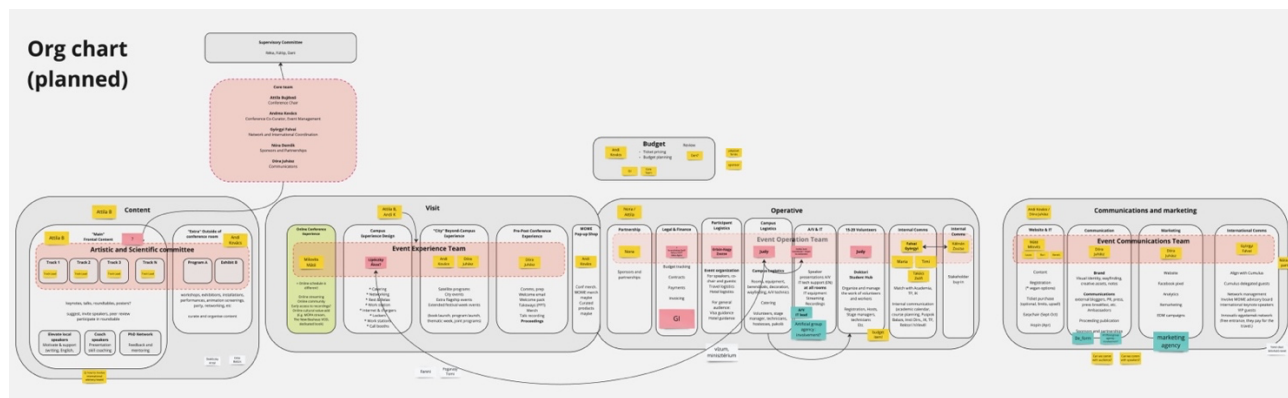


Figure 4. The initial team organisational chart.

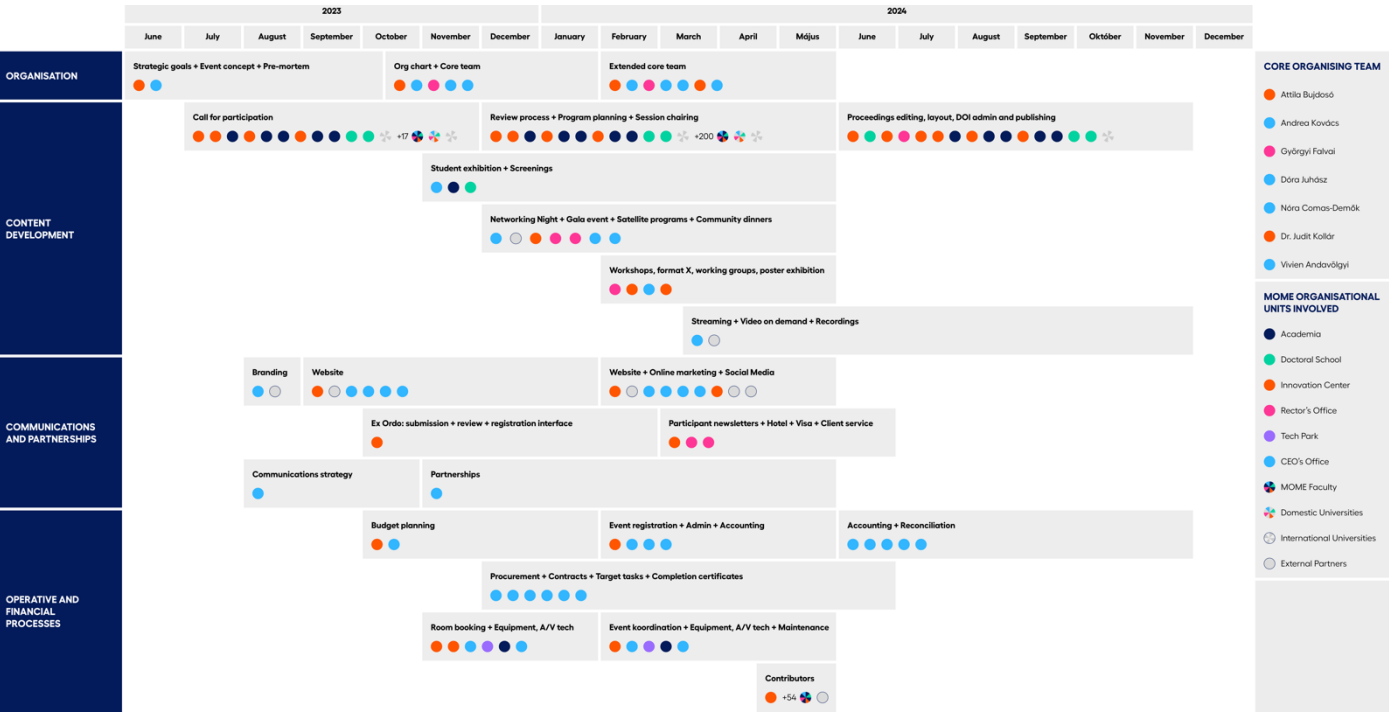


Figure 6. Breakdown of workstreams and contributors from different organisational units.



Figure 7. Most members of the core organising team and the Scientific Committee are on stage at the closing ceremony. Photo: Máté Lakos.

3. Conference Theme, Tracks, Keynotes, and Plenary Talks

The conference theme, "P/References of Design," was initially established prior to the submission of the application to the Cumulus Association's call for conference hosts in 2022. It was further refined and officially published alongside the call for contributions in September 2023, (P/References of Design: Cumulus Budapest 2024, 2023) as follows:

“Our references for understanding and relating to the world, as well as our preferences when we make our choices as humans are confronted by major ecological, socio-economic, and geopolitical challenges. The horizons of art and design are changing. Anchor points, both old and new, must be reconsidered. As modern value structures break down and new ones emerge, we find ourselves in an age of liminality.

A hundred years ago, during another time of global turbulence, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, an emblematic figure of the Bauhaus movement, stated that “tradition must be dynamic.”¹ As we see our own century unfolding, with collapsing ecosystems, struggling global and local communities, and failing economic paradigms, we must admit that Moholy-Nagy was right. Human references and preferences do shift, and must be shifted.

The Cumulus conference in Budapest aims to explore contemporary design culture² by examining its current tensions and parallels. Participants are encouraged to share their perspectives on the ongoing “revaluation of values”³ which concern established references and competing preferences in design.

When the long-standing paradigm of human-centred design falls short in addressing the complexities and the variety of multiple non-human agents in our world, how should we approach design? Should the position and possibilities of the living, sentient, knowing and purposeful human being as the ultimate reference of any cultural activity be reconsidered in the face of the prevailing ideologies of ‘humanness’ inherited from modernism? Is design, as a tool for optimizing user experience and “streamlining the sales curve”,⁴ still preferable when facing the “limits to growth”⁵? Is the user still the legitimate source and focus of the design process? How should the starting points and objectives of design be set today?

What is the role of design and the designer in society anyway? Where will the expertise of designers be most crucial in the upcoming years? How should the design profession adapt to effectively address future needs and preferences? How are traditional references being challenged by alternative ontologies in the shadow of climate change, intensifying geopolitical tensions, the emerging post-truth world, and the rise of generative content creation?

During the conference, we will delve into various perspectives of strategic design, systems thinking, co-creation and more-than-human design. The event will also examine tensions and parallels that guide us towards contemporary practices which harness both human and machine creativity, and navigate the social, physical and virtual realms of design. The widening liminal space between value structures will also provide us with a chance to contemplate the dynamics between the centres and peripheries of the global design landscape, along with the history and institutional power structures of modern design.

As a transitional zone situated between the West and the East, the Balkans and the Baltics, Hungary has always encountered diverse and contesting values, resulting in a wide array of references and preferences. With its 143-year history and a recent major institutional renewal, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest invites academics, educators and art and design professionals from all over the world to discuss and consider the revaluation of established frameworks and explore future perspectives of design culture.”

¹ Moholy-Nagy L., 1947. *Vision in Motion*. Chicago: P. Theobald, p. 22.

² Julier, G., 2000. *The Culture of Design*. London: Sage.

³ Nietzsche, F. W., 1883-1885. (2006). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: a Book for All and None*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ The famous sentence, “he streamlines the sales curve”, is written under the portrait of iconic industrial designer Raymond Loewy on the cover of the October 31, 1949 issue of *Time* magazine.

⁵ Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., Behrens III, W. W., 1972. *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books.

3.1 Tracks

To support the strategic objectives outlined in section 2.1, multiple potential track structures were examined. Ultimately, the decision was made to adopt a holistic, all-encompassing approach that welcomes contributions across a wide range of focus areas rather than opting for a more focused yet narrow approach. The following nice tracks were established:

- Centres and Peripheries
- Converging Bodies of Knowledge
- Redefining Data Boundaries
- Bridging Design and Economics
- Speculative Perspectives
- The Power of Immersion
- The Future of Well-being
- Taming Entropy: Systems Design for Climate and Change
- Ways of Living Together

The potential tracks were formulated in a way that MOME faculty and lecturers from all relevant departmental units — Academia, Doctoral School, and Innovation Center — could serve as track chairs, fostering collaboration and bridging organisational silos within the university. Selecting track chairs from MOME allowed for a closer working relationship between the conference chair and track chairs while involving co-chairs from other — including international — universities introduced more diverse expertise.

When appointing co-chairs, and later reviewers and session chairs, emphasis was placed on including not only international contributors but also representatives from fellow domestic universities. This approach enabled academics from other Hungarian institutions, such as the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Eötvös Loránd University, and Central European University, to engage with the network offered by the Cumulus Association.

Additionally, a special track was organised by the Cumulus PhD Network for doctoral students to present their research and get general feedback.

3.2 Formats

In addition to common conference formats like paper presentations, workshops, and posters, the organising team experimented with two formats.

“Slide deck” was proposed to encourage academic, industry, and art professionals to present their creative and professional works, whether it is research, design, or artistic.

“Format X” submissions were welcomed to propose new, experimental formats that actively involve 15+ participants and let them come together and discuss, debate, play, paint, scratch, bend, tear apart, or X a specific topic. Such formats were expected to be engaging, social, inclusive, cooperative, and highly interactive.

3.3 Keynotes

Eric Zimmerman, a renowned game designer, and NYU professor, delivered the first keynote exploring the intersection of play and systems design. His talk, *Gaming the System*, delved into how game design principles can challenge societal norms, inspire creative thinking beyond the digital realm, and be used to design social systems of scale. His talk highlighted themes from his latest book, *The Rules We Break*, advocating for play as a powerful tool for learning and engagement.

Vladan Joler, a professor at the New Media Department of the University of Novi Sad and an interdisciplinary researcher, examined the hidden mechanisms of contemporary technology in his keynote, *New Extractivism*. Focusing on the exploitation embedded in digital infrastructures and algorithmic systems, he unveiled the intricate connections between data extraction, labour, and ecological impact. His talk underscored the necessity of transparency and accountability in technological design and policy.



Figure 8. Vladan Joler delivered his keynote talk on Day 2, May 16, 2024. Photo: Máté Lakos.

Dr. Robin Schuldenfrei, a historian specializing in modern architecture and design, brought a nuanced perspective on materiality in her keynote. She explored the cultural and political dimensions of objects in modernism, drawing from her recent publication, *Objects in Exile*. By examining the migration of design and architectural ideas across borders during the mid-20th century, she illuminated the intersections of luxury, modernism, and identity. Schuldenfrei's insights bridged historical analysis with contemporary relevance, enriching the discourse on the enduring impact of modernist material culture.

3.4 Plenary Talks

In the plenary sessions, speakers brought in local perspectives by reflecting on the keynote talks and shedding light on various topics. Dr. Petra Aczél, a full professor at MOME, discussed educational design in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Adam Somlai-Fischer, co-founder of Prezi.com, designer, media artist, and aspiring musician, talked about his passion for shaping futures and taming technology to make it more humane and less boring. Hedvig Harmati, textile artist, university professor, and head of the MOME Doctoral School, introduced the “Future Traditions” design research and curriculum development process. Dr. Dániel Barcza, strategic vice-rector of MOME, introduced the ongoing Future University project, a comprehensive redesign of the university's educational model. Finally, Lásma Ivaska, director of the Innovation Center at Moholy-Nagy University of Art & Design, presented research projects aiming to design for life in an era of climate crisis.

4. Submission and Review Process

4.1 Initial Submissions

The call for participation received approximately 540 academic paper abstract submissions, significantly exceeding the organisers' prior estimate of around 400. The submission deadline was 15 December 2023. After removing duplicates and miscategorised submissions, 537 academic paper abstracts were reviewed.

The deadline for other formats — workshops, posters, Format X, and slide decks — was 25 January 2024. A total of 80 submissions were received across these formats, slightly fewer than expected (100), as detailed below:

- Slide decks: 37
- Workshops: 27
- Posters: 16
- Format X: 8

4.2 Review Process in the Abstract Phase

From 537 submissions, a total of 185 abstracts were accepted and invited for full-paper submissions. This represented a 34% acceptance rate across all tracks, ranging from 29% to 51% for individual tracks.

67 promising submissions (12%) were rejected but recommended for resubmission as Slide Decks (15), Posters (12), or Short Papers (40) in the Cumulus PhD Network track. For Slide Deck and Poster submissions, authors were offered additional time to submit their materials (between 2 February and 15 February), as the original submission deadline (25 January) was no longer realistic for them.

85% of accept/reject decisions were published on time (on 24 January 2024), and 98% of decisions within a two-day delay. The remainder of the authors were informed within 10 days. These were mostly submissions that were proposed to be moved to other tracks, which required alignment between track chairs.

4.3 Review Process in Full Paper Phase

Altogether, over 700 submissions were received. After the full submission of academic papers, all contributions underwent a double-blind peer review process. Finally, a total of 106 academic papers were accepted to the conference, representing a 19.7% acceptance rate. Additionally, 42 Short Papers, 23 Slide Deck presentations, 18 Posters, 11 Workshops, and 4 Format X submissions were accepted, as detailed in Table 1.

There was a slight delay in the review process, but 94% of authors were notified within three days of the planned decision announcement date. A few submissions were withdrawn by their authors after acceptance, and one was withdrawn following the conference.

Table 1. Contribution formats at the conference.

Format	Selection Process	Presentation Length/Format	Q&A Length	Presentation Mode	Submissions Received	Contributions Accepted
Keynote Talk	Invitation	35'	10'	In-person	N/A	3
Plenary Talk	Invitation	15'	5'	In-person	N/A	5
Academic Paper	Peer Review	15'	5'	In-person*	537	106
Short Paper	Peer Review	10'	5'	Hybrid	87	42
Slide Deck	Peer Review	15'	5'	In-person*	37	23
Workshop	Peer Review	45–180'	N/A	In-person	27	11
Format X	Peer Review	45–90'	N/A	In-person	8	4
Poster	Peer Review	70 x 140 cm print poster	two meet-the-authors sessions	Hybrid	16	12+5
Working Group	Coordinated by Cumulus Association	90'	N/A	Hybrid	N/A	23

5. Conference Experience Planning

5.1 Experience Planning

A multi-layered experience planning (see Table 2) aimed to deliver an engaging and memorable event for attendees.

Table 2. Layers of experience at Cumulus Budapest 2024.

Virtual Experience	Conference app On-demand documentaries Dance performance streaming
City Experience	Gala Dinner City walks Recommended programmes
Social Experience	Networking Night on day 0 Reception on day 1 Community Dinners
Campus Experience	Tech Park tour Activities in campus garden Morning yoga Pop-up shop
Exhibition Experience	Student exhibition Poster exhibition Screenings
Interactive Experience	Workshops Working groups Format X
Presentation Experience	Keynotes Plenary talks Academic papers Short papers Slide decks Q&As

5.2 Outdoor Activities

To harness the value of the MOME campus, several outdoor activities were planned. For instance, a game design workshop entitled “Rock, Paper, or Scissors” was led by keynote speaker Eric Zimmerman on the second day in the campus garden. Some workshops were held outside, and conference participants were invited to join MOME’s regular morning yoga sessions on the roof terrace of the MOME ONE building. Additionally, tours organised to the Tech Park were very popular among participants.



Figure 9–10. “Rock, Paper, or Scissors” workshop by Eric Zimmerman and “Sticks and Ladders - Physical and Theoretical Approaches to the Integration of Participatory Design into School Curricula” by Dr. András Cseh and Szilárd Köninger. Photos: Máté Lakos.

5.3 Pop-up Shop

As an experiment, the front area of the MOME library was turned into a pop-up shop for the three days of the conference. Over 40 design objects and books were showcased, highlighting the local talent and creativity of MOME students and faculty, and were made available for purchase at the location.

5.4 Voucher in the Gift Bag

MOME, as the host university, aimed to treat the large international audience with warm hospitality, which included offering complimentary conference gifts to in-person attendees. At the same time, the organising team sought to balance this generosity with sustainability considerations. Therefore, the gifts offered to participants were intentionally kept limited—to a tote bag, a notebook, and a pen. In addition to this, participants received a voucher. Participants could exchange their vouchers for a university-branded merchandise item, a reusable water bottle, or a booklet, or they could use the voucher to purchase any items on sale in the pop-up shop. This approach allowed useless merchandising objects to be kept to a minimum while allowing participants to select gifts according to their preferences or purchase and take-home local books, art, or design objects of their choice.

6. Key Challenges

6.1 Review Process

Completing the peer review process on time can be a major challenge for conference organisers. The organising team, together with track chairs and co-chairs, recruited over 200 reviewers. As described in sections 4.2 and 4.3, some delays occurred, but the review process was running mostly on time. In the process, some challenges occurred, as explained in the following.

6.2 Submission Process

There were a couple of cases (~5) where authors reached out to the organising team because they had not received feedback on their final paper acceptance. After careful investigation, it was found that some authors who were invited to submit their full papers started to upload their full papers but did not submit them. The Ex Ordo conference management system labelled such contributions as "pending." As it turned out, this label was somewhat misleading because it could be interpreted as "pending review," besides its intended meaning as "pending submission." Upon successful submission of full papers, contributions were labelled as "completed," and authors received an email notification confirming that — but this was not clear to all authors. Papers that were not completely submitted (along with 30% of abstracts that were invited but were not submitted as full papers) were not peer-reviewed and were excluded from the rest of the process.

In some cases, when this situation was discovered early (6–8 weeks before the conference), the conference chair decided to reinsert such submissions into the peer review process. When this was discovered later (in one case, just two weeks before the conference), time was insufficient to enrol the papers into the peer review process, and those papers had to be rejected.

The conference chair raised this issue with the Ex Ordo support team and suggested renaming the label of unsubmitted submissions to "draft." The product team at Ex Ordo committed to considering this feedback.

6.3 Anonymity of Submissions

Some submissions did not fulfil the requirement of anonymity and had to be rejected during the abstract phase or final submission phase.

One short paper submission was submitted non-anonymised. During correspondence with the author, it was found that the call for participation in the conference had not explicitly required short paper authors to submit their initial submissions anonymised. From the textual context, this requirement could have been assumed — since all other submission types required anonymity — but it was not a formal requirement. When this was discovered, the conference chair asked the author to resubmit their short paper in anonymised form, and it was assigned to new reviewers.

6.4 Written Feedback on Academic Paper Abstracts

After announcing accept/reject decisions on submitted paper abstracts, 44 authors reached out to conference organisers via email because they had not received written feedback on their abstract submissions. Some authors expressed doubts about whether there had indeed been a review process and reviewers. Some simply asked whether it was possible to review the decisions, while others genuinely asked for feedback so that they could improve their work. Additionally, ten accepted authors requested feedback to help them write their full papers.

The default setting in the Ex Ordo system required reviewers to share feedback with track chairs, and they were able to choose whether to make their feedback visible to authors or not. Many reviewers followed the default setting — hence, some reviews were visible only to track chairs and not to authors. Reviewers were also required to provide numerical ratings, but these were not visible to the authors either.

While it was not previously announced what kind of feedback would be given to authors during the abstract selection phase, this was a very unfortunate situation for multiple reasons. First,

- Invisible feedback could not help authors improve their work (regardless of whether they were accepted or not).
- The situation caused some authors to question whether there had been a review process at all.
- The organisers received many email queries after announcing the decisions, leading to an overwhelming two weeks of communicating with the authors.

The organisers and track chairs made efforts to reply to every author who reached out to them and shared feedback manually, either via email or within the Ex Ordo system. In four cases, the original decisions were revisited.

6.5 Hybrid vs. Onsite Experience: Remote Participation, Remote Presenting

Providing the option to present at the conference remotely or attend the event virtually was a major discussion item between the organising team and representatives from the Cumulus Association.

The following perspectives were taken into account:

1. Allowing authors to present remotely offers greater inclusivity to those unable to travel due to budget, health, or time constraints.
2. Having remote presenters can detract from the onsite attendee experience, as people are increasingly fatigued by online speeches and encounters.
3. Having remote presenters introduces additional technical risks to the preparation of sessions.
4. Remote presenting reduces the serendipity of encounters and decreases the networking value of the conference.
5. Charging the same registration fee for in-person and remote presenters may feel inappropriate, but the reality is that the bulk of conference organisational costs remain unchanged regardless of presentation format.
6. Charging a significantly lower registration fee for remote presenters introduces unpredictability to revenue planning, potentially jeopardising the budget.
7. Streaming presentations increase the visibility of the content presented at the event.
8. Streamed content, if done properly, can be shared later as recordings.
9. The cost of streaming (technology and team) can be significant if done professionally.

Considering all of the above aspects, the organising team decided to limit remote participation to streaming from one room — the Auditorium — and participation in Cumulus Working Groups. The Auditorium hosted all plenary sessions and a subset of track sessions, which were streamed throughout the three days. This decision also helped address the capacity issues of the Main Auditorium, as described in section 2.2.

Cumulus Working Groups announced their topics beforehand, and each session was provided with a separate Zoom link to allow for remote joining. Separate Zoom accounts were purchased just for the conference, but here, a small yet serious mistake was made: parallel sessions had been created from the same Zoom account. This was discovered late during the technical checks and fixing the invite links and properly communicating them to working group members and participants caused delays — resulting in one working group being inaccessible online and some other working groups starting late and under frustrating conditions.

Regarding remote presenting, the organisers announced the call for participation with the requirement that at least one presenter per paper be onsite and present in person. However, at the specific request of the Cumulus President and the chair of the Cumulus PhD Network track, an exception was made for

doctoral students. Additionally, already approved speakers who were not able to travel to the venue due to visa issues or last-minute health concerns were allowed to present remotely.

To reduce the risk of technical or connection issues and ensure a smooth transition between speakers, the organising team requested remote presenters to show a pre-recorded video. The videos, which included both the slides and the presenter's face, felt almost as if they were presented in real time. After the talk, presenters were invited to join live for the Q&A online via Microsoft Teams. This solution seemed to be a good compromise between accessibility, quality of experience, and enabling academic discourse. However, in some cases, due to a lack of appropriate communication between organisers and stage managers, dialling in for the Q&A was hectic and last minute. Additionally, some remote presenters expressed discontent as they were not able to follow the track their presentation was part of—since streaming was limited to one room only.

Due to local tax laws, taxation of registration fees differed for onsite and remote participants. This made the invoicing process more tedious, and participants switching from one form of participation to another created extra administrative work, as explained in section 6.8.

6.6 Food and Catering

The university canteen, which is already busy on normal university days, has limited capacity. Therefore, it was decided to close it for the event so that the space could be utilised by an external catering company. This required proactive communication with stakeholders, university leadership, and the student union. To ensure lunch was served smoothly and on time and to avoid jeopardising the packed conference schedule, food boxes were handed out to participants. This allowed for much quicker service and enabled participants to use multiple areas of the campus, including the garden, to eat their lunches — both of which proved to be highly effective. However, it also generated significant amounts of (recyclable) waste and offered less flexibility for participants to choose their meals compared to what would have been possible with a buffet-style catering solution.

6.7 Campus Wayfinding

MOME Campus has seven buildings, and the floor numbering can be difficult to understand. As a result, a consistent room naming convention, dedicated host personnel, wayfinding communication, and a detailed campus map (Figure 11) were implemented. Still, onsite participants often found it challenging to navigate and locate the 24 locations spread across six buildings.



Figure 11. Conference and campus map.

6.8 Invoicing

Invoicing, though less visible, is a crucial aspect of the event organisation, and proved to be a significant challenge for the organising team. One of the reasons for choosing the Ex Ordo conference management system was that it covers most aspects of conference organisation: submission and review management, communication with authors, programme management and publishing, registration, and payments.

One shortfall discovered during the process was that the invoicing solution of Ex Ordo was not compliant with local tax authority requirements. For instance, the interface did not collect tax IDs, which are required for issuing invoices in Hungary for organisations. The hybrid participation model also posed challenges under local tax laws: the VAT rate for the registration fee differs for remote and onsite participants. A complex taxation scheme had to be followed based on the following criteria: whether the participant is onsite or remote, whether the buyer is an individual or an organisation, and whether the buyer is from Hungary, the EU, or a third country.

Taking all these complexities into account, and following a failed attempt to automate the process, the organising team and the finance team at MOME had to make the difficult decision to issue all invoices manually and accept it as an administrative overhead.

6.9 Communication with Authors

The organising team created a shared email inbox to manage all communications with attendees. While this worked well technically, the effort required to communicate with individual participants — whether regarding their submissions or the review process, practical details such as finding accommodation and issuing invitation letters, or last-minute changes requested by authors that affected the programme schedule — was vastly underestimated.

7. The Conference in Numbers

The conference showcased impressive submission and participation efforts. Over 700 submissions were received for the call for participation. Attendees hailed from 58 different countries, with more than 600 attendees in total, including 450 paying onsite registrants. The remainder of the participants were onsite contributors from MOME and other institutions, including track chairs and session chairs, representatives of the Cumulus Association, and online participants.

Communication with participants was overwhelming and required constant dedication: the central email address saw 300+ email threads; additionally, over 1,000 direct messages were exchanged through the Ex Ordo conference management platform, and over 5,000 system messages were sent out by the platform.

Administrative works had to follow: over 450 invoices were issued manually, 60 visa invitation letters were issued, and more than 100 certificates of participation were provided. Over 85 contracts were signed, and 100 incoming invoices were paid. Over 80 briefs were given to the graphic designer, reflecting the extensive work needed to prepare the venue and the event. The conference experience was totalled with exhibitions showcasing projects by 41 students and 12 screenings. Over 40 design items and books were featured in the Pop-up Shop.

The event reached 99,000 people with over 275,000 social media appearances and more than 20 press articles.

8. Participant Feedback

A feedback survey was sent out to participants approximately one month after the event. Due to the late send-out date, the number of respondents was relatively low: 43 people filled it out from 607 recipients (3 emails bounced back from the original 610 target recipients).

Table 3. Participant feedback was collected through a survey.

Number of responses within a question group (r), number of ratings (n), score on scale 1–5 average (a), % of positive responses (p).

	r	n	a	p		r	n	a	p
SUBMISSION AND REVIEW PROCESS					IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE – SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROGRAMMES				
Call for participation	41	36	4,47	91,7%	Networking night at Lumen (Tuesday)	41	20	4,95	100,0%
Ex Ordo submission interface	41	34	4,24	79,4%	Welcome reception at MOME (Wednesday)	41	32	4,69	100,0%
Submission process	41	32	4,22	81,3%	Community dinners at restaurants (Thursday)	41	16	4,81	100,0%
Review process	41	31	4,03	71,0%	Gala dinner and party at Haris Park (Friday)	41	13	4,62	92,3%
Communication with programme committee	41	33	4,55	90,9%	Satellite programmes (City walks, LAM visits)	245	5	5,00	100,0%
Programme finalisation and editing	41	33	4,12	78,8%	Recommended programmes in Budapest	40	15	4,53	93,3%
PREPARING FOR THE CONFERENCE					IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE – HOSPITALITY				
Communication with the organisers	42	39	4,38	87,2%	Arrival to venue	40	35	4,74	100,0%
Communication of programme	41	41	4,27	82,9%	Registration	40	37	4,65	91,9%
Registration process	41	41	4,59	95,1%	Wayfinding on campus	40	37	4,32	83,8%
Ticket options	41	36	4,08	75,0%	Accessibility	40	31	4,58	96,8%
Conference website	41	41	4,41	90,2%	Catering: coffee, tea, soft drinks and snacks	40	38	4,79	97,4%
Conference mobile app	41	38	4,37	84,2%	Catering: lunch	40	37	4,24	81,1%
Hotel, travel and city information	41	30	4,37	90,0%	Hostesses and staff helpfulness	40	37	4,78	94,6%
Email updates sent via Ex Ordo	41	35	4,26	80,0%	Information desk availability and helpfulness	40	35	4,80	97,1%
Branding	40	34	4,59	91,2%	Wi-Fi access	40	34	4,65	94,1%

IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE – PROGRAMME									
Keynotes and plenary talks	41	37	4,54	89,2%	Printing options	40	7	4,00	71,4%
Paper, short paper and slide deck presentations	41	35	4,11	82,9%	Taxi service	40	8	4,63	87,5%
Workshops and Format X	41	27	4,30	85,2%	Overall quality of the experience at the campus	40	38	4,76	94,7%
Poster exhibition	41	30	3,73	66,7%	IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE – LOGISTICS				
Working groups	40	24	4,33	83,3%	Audio quality of presentations	41	40	4,63	100,0%
How many programmes were running parallel	40	37	3,76	62,2%	Video quality of presentations	41	39	4,56	92,3%
Access to programme onsite	41	40	4,40	95,0%	Streaming from auditorium to other rooms	41	21	4,67	95,2%
Schedule, pace, being on time	41	40	4,45	92,5%	Room and furniture	41	39	4,72	100,0%
Moderation of sessions	41	40	4,53	90,0%	Room ventilation	41	39	4,64	94,9%
Overall quality of the programme	41	40	4,50	92,5%	VIRTUAL CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE				
IN-PERSON EXPERIENCE – SPECIAL PROGRAMMES AT CAMPUS					Ex Ordo and Webex interface	31	11	3,45	54,5%
Student exhibition	40	25	4,20	88,0%	Audio quality of streaming	31	7	3,86	71,4%
Screenings	40	16	4,25	87,5%	Video quality of streaming	31	7	4,00	71,4%
Morning yoga	40	3	4,33	100,0%	On-demand videos of performances	31	3	3,00	33,3%
Tech Park tour	40	7	4,86	100,0%	Quality of presentations streamed online	31	7	3,57	57,1%
Outdoor activities	40	11	4,64	100,0%	Overall experience of virtual conference	31	8	3,63	62,5%
Pop-up shop	40	34	4,32	88,2%	PRESENTING REMOTELY				
Networking opportunities	40	38	4,58	97,4%	Technical setup for joining the Q&A remotely	32	7	3,14	57,1%
Overall quality of exp. of special programmes	39	37	4,51	91,9%	Overall experience for joining the Q&A remotely	32	7	3,14	57,1%
					POST-CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE				
					Video documentaries	40	21	3,86	85,7%
					Access to press photos	40	27	4,30	85,2%
					Quality of press photos	40	26	4,46	92,3%

Feedback gathered from open-ended questions can be summarised as follows:

Top positive sentiments:

- **Networking Opportunities:** Many participants highlighted networking as one of the best experiences, with comments like “meeting the participants,” “networking with other universities,” and “interaction with colleagues from all over the world.”
- **Quality of Event and Presentations:** Attendees appreciated the quality of the conference, mentioning “high-quality speakers,” “impactful presentations,” and “quality of conversation and papers.”
- **Venue and Atmosphere:** The venue and atmosphere were praised, with statements such as “fantastic campus,” “friendly and welcoming environment,” and “organised thoughtfully and in detail.”
- **Organisation:** The organisation of the event was described as having a “designerly quality,” being “very well organised, with passion and care,” and “organised very thoughtfully and in detail.”

Top negative sentiments:

- **Hybrid/Remote Participation Issues:** Remote presenters faced challenges like limited access to tracks, lack of proper communication and preparation, and technical issues with pre-recorded videos not being played on time.
- **Program and Organisational Challenges:** Participants expressed frustration over overwhelming schedules, too many programmes running parallel, complicated conference app, the late announcement of the final programme, and difficult campus navigation.
- **Inclusion and Accessibility Concerns:** There were mentions of limited tickets for the gala dinner and the lack of diverse voices in keynote presentations.

The feedback survey was sent out to all 610 attendees of the event. As such, it does not include feedback from academics who chose not to submit an abstract for any reason, whose contributions were not accepted, or those who withdrew their contribution from the conference.

9. Conclusions

As seen from the participant feedback collected, Cumulus Budapest 2024 was overall considered a successful event. The quality of the content, the breadth of topics discussed at the conference, and the networking opportunities provided a deep professional experience, while the venue setup, attention to detail, the variety of on-campus programme items, and the accompanying social and cultural programmes offered a rich visitor experience.

Identifying potential risks early in the organisation process helped mitigate key challenges. Most organisational or technical issues, except one — remote participants being unable to join one of the Working Group meetings as described in section 6.5 — were resolved promptly behind the scenes.

In terms of programming, three areas are recommended for reconsideration by future organisers.

Accepting over 170 contributions with presentations meant that presentation sessions were running in 7 parallel rooms while working group meetings and workshops were held in 6 additional rooms. Having 13 sessions running in parallel created audience fragmentation and evoked a sense of FOMO (fear of missing out) among participants.

Cumulus working groups enable members of the Cumulus network to engage in discussions about various topics regularly. Onsite meetings during the Cumulus conferences provide an opportunity for working group members to meet in person. However, some of the Working Group meetings were in fact mini symposiums embedded in the conference programme with local speakers invited. The value of such meetings should be revisited, as they may not always align with the intended goals of the working groups and create unnecessary competition for other sessions at the conference.

Enabling online presentation and participation, while inclusive, brings many logistical and budgetary challenges. Proper streaming is costly, and managing online audiences and presenters requires dedicated resources and attention.

9.1 Practical Recommendations for Future Organisers

- Run pre-mortem sessions to identify potential risks early and mitigate challenges.
- Thoughtfully and respectfully reject last-minute requests.
- Assign a dedicated person to manage the shared email inbox and correspondence with authors and attendees.
- Hire a dedicated event manager to oversee logistics, scheduling, and communication with conference staff.
- Dedicate personnel for specific tasks: event management, working groups, workshops, onsite host coordination, info desk, and exhibitions. These roles are critical to handling the scale and complexity of the event.
- Limit the number of working group meetings and parallel sessions to maintain a cohesive programme.
- Improve hybrid participation through robust technical checks, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and detailed communications with track chairs, session chairs, stage managers, and A/V technicians.
- Enhance wayfinding and onsite support to assist with navigation.

- When planning the submission and review process timeline, account for submission deadline extensions, inevitable delays in the peer review process, and the time required to manage submissions, communicate decisions, and respond to inquiries.
- Provide templates for contributing authors to streamline the layout editing process.
- Define file naming conventions upfront to avoid working with files named like “Camera-ready.docx.”
- Remind authors with draft submissions to complete the submission process.
- Ask authors to always reference their submission ID in correspondence.
- Brief reviewers to provide actionable feedback to their reviewers.
- Configure the submission management system in ways that make written feedback mandatory and visible to authors.
- Develop strict timelines for presentation file collection and management, moderator and stage manager briefing, and technical checks.
- Integrate legal disclaimers (e.g., copyright statements) into the submission and registration workflows.
- Automate processes wherever possible, including issuing visa invitation letters or certificates of attendance or contribution.
- Avoid leaving technical checks or installation works for Day 0; complete them by Day -1.
- Avoid manual invoicing; outsource it to a company if at all possible. Choose a payment provider with whom you have prior experience.

Cumulus Budapest 2024 was a highly successful conference in terms of networking, quality content, and experience delivery despite the organisational challenges. The lessons learned and shared above provide a roadmap to streamline processes and improve future conferences of similar scale and complexity hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest and other universities within the Cumulus network.

References

P/References of Design: Cumulus Budapest 2024. (2023). <https://cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu/>

About the Author:

Attila Bujdosó works as strategic design lead at MOME Innovation Center and is the conference chair for the Cumulus Budapest 2024 conference. In 2019, he published *Social Design Cookbook: Recipes for Social Cooperation*. His research interest lies in designing social systems. Previously, he worked as lead UX designer at BlackRock, co-founded collaboration software startup Opp.io, led design research projects at Kitchen Budapest new media lab, worked as an architect for ONL, and was curator at Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre. His works have been exhibited at the Venice Architecture Biennale, Transmediale, Science Gallery, DOX, and Pixelache.

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P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

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Conference Website

cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu

Conference Tracks

Centres and Peripheries
Converging Bodies of Knowledge
Redefining Data Boundaries
Bridging Design and Economics
Speculative Perspectives
The Power of Immersion
The Future of Well-being
Taming Entropy: Systems Design for Climate and Change
Ways of Living Together
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