

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN



EATING TOGETHER: TOWARDS A GUT-CENTRED APPROACH IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN.

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DOI: 10.63442/GINL3502

KEYWORDS | EATING, RELATIONAL, EMBODIED, SOCIO-MATERIAL, PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

ABSTRACT | Designing for the complexity of the socio-environmental challenges we are part of requires a shift from individual-centered methods to more respectful and caring practices. As a response, Participatory Design (PD) is expanding its repertoire to embrace relational and processual approaches motivated by the curiosity to articulate a more caring, response-able attitude toward others, humans, and beyond. This research project aims to contribute to this shift by examining the potential of thinking and doing (with) eating as an embodied experience in PD spatial transformation projects. My research approach intentionally translocates the knowledge-making process from the brain to the gut, taking cues from our everyday metabolic engagement and the material relations they create. Through eating, this approach aims to emphasize body experiences as a primary source of knowledge. Preliminary findings highlight a profound link between gut-driven engagement and researchers, designers, and participants' capacity to address complex societal and environmental issues, advocating a shift towards gut-centered PD.

1. Introduction

In the realm of Participatory Design, this paper delves into the nuanced intersection of bodily desires, collective action, and design processes to reimagine how communities can live together. Drawing inspiration from the conference theme “Ways of Living Together,” my research addresses the challenges of engaging communities in decision-making, confronts the inherent difficulty in mobilizing active participation, and proposes an approach rooted in exploring bodily desires, explicitly focusing on eating.

Participatory Design (PD) is a collaborative approach that involves stakeholders in the design process, aiming to create more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. It has gained traction in various fields, including urban planning, community development, and healthcare, as a means to address complex societal challenges together with communities (Huybrechts et al., 2022; Huybrechts & Teli, 2020). Rooted in the principles of Participatory Design, our research reflects on bodily desires (Groys, 2022), mainly eating (Mol, 2008), as a means to activate self and collective reflection and action. The research explores how incorporating bodily experiences, centred on processes around digestion, can facilitate deeper connections and more intimate relations between human inhabitants and more-than-human participants (Akama et al., 2020; Akama & Yee, 2016; Baek et al., 2018; Kasulis, 2002; Light & Akama, 2012, 2014), positioning food as a dynamic catalyst for caring and response-able PD.

2. Thinking and Doing with *Eating* as an Embodied Experience in PD

Designing for the complexities of socio-environmental challenges requires a shift from individual-centered approaches to more respectful and caring practices (Pihkala & Karasti, 2022). Participatory Design (PD) is undergoing an expansion of its repertoire to embrace more relational and processual approaches, driven by a curiosity to articulate a more caring and response-able attitude toward others, humans, and beyond (Huybrechts et al., 2022; Huybrechts & Teli, 2020). This research project aims to contribute to this shift by examining the potential of *thinking and doing with eating* as an embodied experience in PD spatial transformation projects (D. Haraway, 1988; D. J. Haraway, 2016). To connect beyond participation, *reaching out by reaching in*. Envisioning ways of doing PD based on explorations to bring ourselves and the people we work with closer to our bodies, closer to our guts, as a way to avoid distant perspectives, forefront socio-ecological relations, stimulate acting, and enable inhabiting among compromised worlds (Braidotti et al., 2018) (Figure 1).

My research approach intentionally *translocates* the knowledge-making process from the brain to the gut through *eating*, taking cues from our everyday metabolic engagement (Mol, 2021) and the socio-material relations they create (Barad, 2003). The reasons for choosing to eat are multifaceted – personal fulfillment, practical considerations, approach exploration, philosophical inquiries, ontological reflections, and pleasurable experiences all play a part. Eating enables us to deeply immerse ourselves as designers in cultivating meaningful connections within our social, cultural, and natural worlds. Eating is an activity we perform every day. Eating is essential for our sustenance and nourishment, but it is also a fundamental bodily desire. As Boris Groys (2022) suggests, bodily desires are mechanisms by which we are brought back to ourselves. Bodily desires connect our thinking with our body, connecting us with the fleshy side of being human. This is also the case with eating. It allows us to engage with the materiality of our existence (Van Daele, 2022). It reminds us of our interconnectedness with the world around us (Mol, 2021).

My experience as a woman growing up in a food-loving family and my role as an architect in transforming community kitchens in Caracas, Venezuela, are feeding the way I approach Participatory Design. Following a *gut feeling* – could also be named the ethnographic hunch (Pink, 2021) – about the very material possibility of carrying out a more caring (De La Bellacasa, 2012) and engaging PD by centering its processes around eating. Annamarie Mol’s ethnographic approach theoretically supports this gut feeling. In her book, “Eating in Theory,” she explores how bodily sustenance processes like eating and digesting foster an alternative way of “being, knowing, doing and relating” that facilitates a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness and socio-material relations with other living beings, promotes collective

responsibility and fosters sustainable practices (Barad, 2003). She also delves into the situatedness of eating, the positionality of the eater, and the mutual transformation coming from this engagement:

“Knowing may also come about when, in a specific situation, a specific person attends to selected bits of the world that, as she ingested them, affect her in this or that not-quite-predictable way” (Mol, 2021, p. 61).

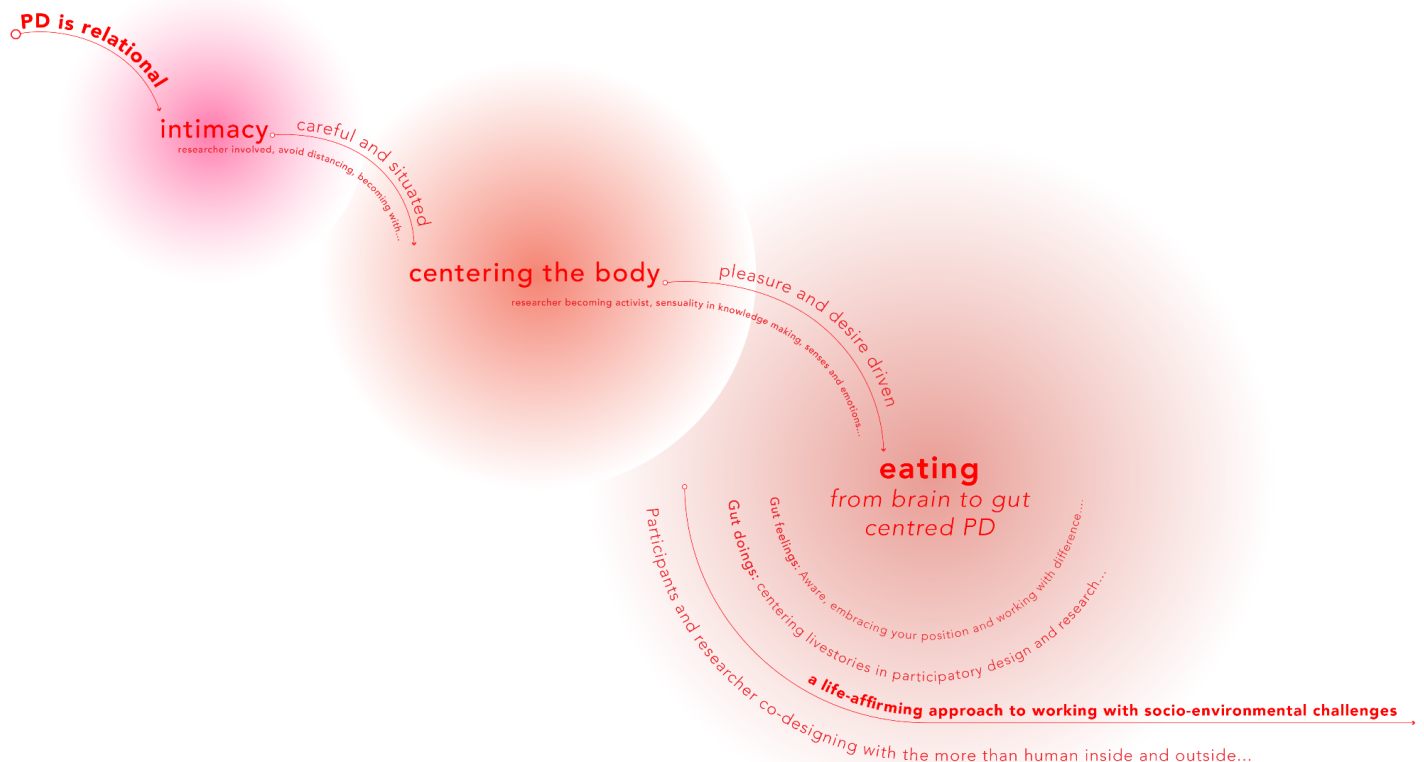


Figure 1. From brain to gut-centered Participatory Design (PD). Eating as a pleasure and desire-driven approach for a careful and situated PD. Eating is a mechanism for PD researchers to centre the body, engage with the sensuality of knowledge-making, avoid distancing, and become involved in the process. Eating as a life-affirming approach to working with socio-environmental challenges.

3. Digestion Analogies for Other Ways of Knowledge-Making in PD

In my research, I hope to disrupt dominant and anthropocentric ways of knowing and embrace what it means to take relationality and emergence seriously (Pihkala & Karasti, 2022). I aim to disrupt dominant and anthropocentric ways of knowing by embracing the embodied knowledge that emerges from our everyday metabolic engagements, mainly through eating. This approach challenges traditional notions of knowledge production and highlights the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors in the design process. This research explores thinking with (De La Bellacasa 2012) our gut with the “explicit purpose to make things ‘thicker.’” The specificity, situatedness, materiality, relationality, and transformation capacity already embedded in eating make it a rich and provocative field for PD researchers and designers to engage with. In my work, this translates into three analogies between participatory design stages and the process of digestion, allowing ways of thinking and doing with our guts rather than our minds (Figure 2):

3.1 Auto-Ethnographic Phase: In-Digestion

The first phase, *in digestion*, allows the researcher to recognize her position as an outsider and gain awareness of herself as the body slowly senses and makes sense of the socio-material conditions she is working with. Embracing bodily discomfort becomes a means to process something not yet metabolised. This phase sets the stage for response-able and situated research and a deeper engagement with the site and its actors through digestion.

3.2 Engagement Phase: Digestion

During the *digestion* phase, time allows my body not to “bounce back” but to transform with the site. The researcher engages with the site and its actors through a process of breaking down to aid assimilation. This involves collectively crushing, squishing, cutting, and chewing parts of the site, dissolving boundaries between in and out, land and self, human and beyond. As the process unfolds, connections are created, and as we eat, the gut becomes the locus of thinking and knowing, facilitating shared understanding and action. A process aiming to reveal experiences, imaginations, *past, present* (D. Haraway, 2010) , and future ways forward.

3.3 Outcome Phase: Excretions

The final phase, *excretions*, involves the results of making and coming to be with expanded and deepened relationalities with other beings. This phase encompasses socio-material practices, meanings, projects, and products that emerge from an “enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others,” shared concerns, and collective commitments.

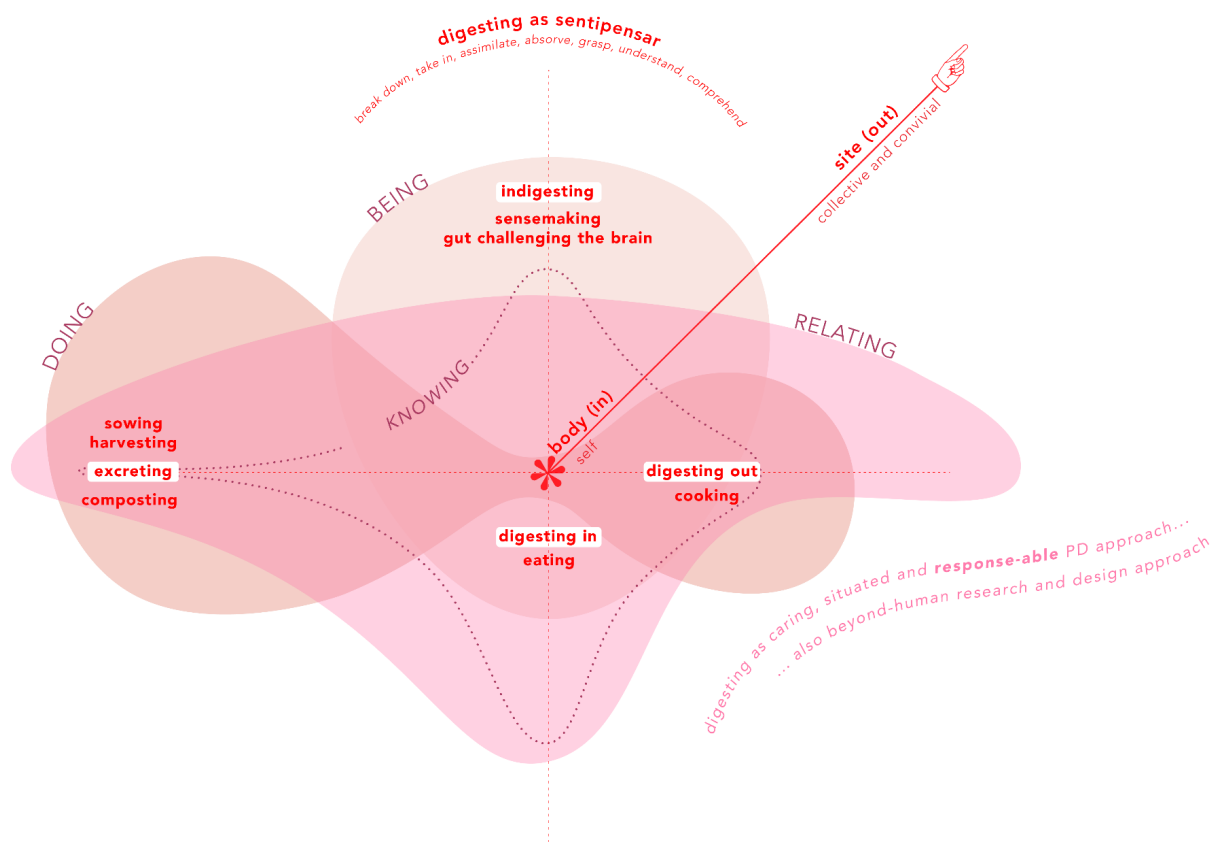


Figure 2. Analogies between participatory design stages and the process of digestion. Three stages of digestion – indigesting, digestion in and out, and excreting – and its relation with a transformational capacity going from the self (inside of our bodies) to the collective (outside: land and others). It is inspired by Annemarie Mol’s *Eating in Theory*, in which being, doing, knowing, and relating traverse with different intensities between in and out in the digestion stages.

4. Progress to Date and Plans for Further Research

In my practice-based research, I have worked in different contexts ranging from social housing neighbourhoods and former extraction landscapes in Limburg, Belgium, to community kitchens in the self-built settlements of Caracas, Venezuela. Thus far, I have engaged in three different trajectories through indigestion and digestion from a (self)ethnography perspective centred on eating. Concrete actions include spending time on site, cooking, eating, *sobremesas*, picnics, potlucks, interviews, relations maps, photography, participants photography, gut-guided walks, site sense-making with our guts, composting and planting (Figure 3). As I approach half of my PhD trajectory, I plan to work further in the third stage of digestion, excretions. I will explicitly engage with the materiality and processes of space transformation coming from gut-centred knowledge in the form of, for example, collective infrastructures for cooking, composting, and gardening. I would also like to open a new trajectory to explore the potential of engaging more deeply with more than human actors through a gut-centred PD approach, increasing their agency over imminent spatial transformation projects, specifically urban renewal, so far centred around human concerns.

In working with different communities and landscapes, the research becomes a container (Le Guin & Haraway, 2019), a collection of situations in which our guts have a knowledge-making role—collecting experiences and devising spaces of possibility to materialize the world we want to live in. Thus, going through this collection offers other PD researchers and designers the possibility of translocating knowledge coming to exist from moments filled with specificity to other moments or situations, taking digestion as a body-centred, engaged PD approach, and producing other - also very site-specific outcomes - excretions. However, challenges arise in translocating knowledge respectfully without appropriating or imposing and in navigating the implications of this approach for how we relate to others and transform our ways of living and the spaces we inhabit. I would like to take part, with fellow designers and researchers, in answering these questions. The CUMULUS community and the PhD network have proved to be an engaging scenario to discuss the opportunities and challenges of thinking and doing with our bodies - rather than our minds - and to devise ways of increasing the agency of more than human actors in our processes.

My preliminary findings suggest at least three reasons for PD researchers and designers why need “pay attention to how matter and discourse combine in the visceral body.” First, it provides an embodied way of overcoming dualistic thinking: body and mind, self and others, emotion, and cognition, as it “alerts us to the viscosity of being embodied and entangled in human and non-human nets of materiality and meaning” (Probyn, 2015). Second, it helps us adopt an experimental and transformative rather than a descriptive orientation, as it enhances our willingness to ‘take in’ (quite literally) the world in the act of knowledge-making (Gibson-Graham, 2011, p. 22). Third, it highlights a profound connection between gut-driven engagement and the researchers’, designers’, and participants’ capacity to address complex societal and environmental issues. Therefore, the colloquium could be an opportunity to think together about how centering the body and our guts could aid in developing capabilities to become more caring and responsible researchers (De La Bellacasa, 2012).



Figure 3. Going through the three stages of *digestion* during my fieldwork in the ‘El Sinai’ community kitchen in Caracas, Venezuela. This case will be appropriately expanded upon during the presentation at the CUMULUS conference.

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P/REFERENCES OF DESIGN

This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.

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ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

Conference Organisers

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