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Original article

ENTREPRENEURIAL INDUSTRIAL DESIGN: ASSERTING PROJECTUAL AUTONOMY BEYOND NEOLIBERAL LOGICS

DISEÑO INDUSTRIAL EMPRENDEDOR: AFIRMANDO LA AUTONOMÍA PROYECTUAL MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS LÓGICAS NEOLIBERALES

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship in industrial design entails the convergence and conflict of two distinct cultural logics: that of design and that of business. This self-organized mode of professional practice, increasingly prevalent in contemporary life, is shaped by a dominant ideological infrastructure rooted in global centers, which promotes so-called "success stories" based on economic performance. Such narratives often marginalize alternative practices and influence designers' professional expectations, limiting the imagination of divergent or locally rooted trajectories. This article, derived from doctoral research, explores alternative ways of understanding entrepreneurship in design by analyzing the discursive cultures adopted by industrial designers and how they reinterpret entrepreneurial activity in specific **territorial** contexts. The study is grounded in a multiple case analysis of eight entrepreneurial initiatives developed between 2009 and 2019 by graduates of the Faculty of Arts at the National University of La Plata, within the Buenos Aires Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (EEB). Methodologically, the research adopts

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a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with designers and key informants. It is framed by an integrated analytical model that considers three interrelated dimensions: the designer-entrepreneur, the enterprise, and the ecosystem in which it unfolds. Through this lens, the study reconstructs entrepreneurial trajectories and examines how designers negotiate the intersection of professional identity, local context, and personal life projects. The findings highlight the ways in which designers articulate critical forms of self-organization, resisting hegemonic market logics and pursuing what the study terms projectual sovereignty—an autonomous and context-sensitive way of designing and living.

Keywords: discursive culture, industrial design, entrepreneurial ecosystem, projectual sovereignty, Province of Buenos Aires, National University of La Plata.

Resumen

El emprendimiento en diseño industrial implica la convergencia y el conflicto de dos culturas: la del diseño y la empresarial. Esta forma de trabajo autoorganizado, cada vez más presente en la vida contemporánea, se apoya en una infraestructura ideológica dominante —originada en contextos centrales— que promueve los llamados "casos de éxito", basados casi exclusivamente en su rendimiento económico. Estos discursos tienden a invisibilizar experiencias alternativas y moldean subjetivamente las expectativas de los diseñadores, restringiendo la imaginación profesional hacia narrativas divergentes. Este artículo, derivado de una investigación doctoral, explora formas alternativas de comprender el emprendimiento en diseño, a partir del análisis de las culturas discursivas adoptadas por diseñadores industriales y de cómo reinterpretan esta actividad en contextos locales. La investigación se basa en un estudio de caso múltiple de ocho iniciativas emprendedoras desarrolladas entre 2009 y 2019 por egresados de la Facultad de Artes de la Universidad Nacional de La Plata, insertos en el ecosistema emprendedor bonaerense (EEB). El enfoque metodológico es cualitativo y utiliza entrevistas semiestructuradas con diseñadores e informantes clave. El análisis se estructura en torno a un modelo integral que contempla tres dimensiones interrelacionadas: el sujeto emprendedor, su emprendimiento y el ecosistema donde opera. El estudio permite reconstruir las trayectorias emprendedoras y examinar cómo los diseñadores negocian su identidad profesional, sus vínculos territoriales y sus proyectos de vida. En ese proceso, despliegan prácticas de autoorganización crítica que desafían las lógicas de mercado y persiguen lo que definimos como soberanía proyectual.

Palabras clave: cultura discursiva, diseño industrial, ecosistema emprendedor, soberanía proyectual, Provincia de Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional de La Plata.

Introduction: cultural tensions in entrepreneurial industrial design

Entrepreneurship in industrial design involves the convergence and conflict between two distinct epistemic cultures: that of design and that of business. Numerous authors have addressed this intersection as a structural friction between divergent frameworks of meaning. Kathryn Best[1] directly refers to it as a "clash of cultures," given that design and business operate based on different beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding success, value, time, and the purpose of practice.

While design is often grounded in open-ended, exploratory processes aimed at cultural or social transformation, mainstream entrepreneurship promotes logics of efficiency, profitability, scalability, and measurable performance.[2,3,4]

Both cultures are sustained by ideological infrastructures with strong performativity[5,6]: the narratives constructed around practice—what is designed, how, and for whom—are not neutral. Rather, they sediment into habits, dispositions, rituals, and exclusions that shape how the discipline is articulated and exercised. In this sense, the design studio within industrial design schools is not merely a pedagogical space, but a device of projectual subjectivation.[7]

As Galán[8] points out, it is where "designers are designed"—that is, where ways of perceiving, intervening, narrating, and desiring are internalized in disciplinary terms. The projectual identity that is formed is deeply cultural, situated, and dependent on the dominant institutional and professional ethos. We can thus affirm that it is there that designers are "designed," and that members of this community project their expectations, acquire a particular understanding of the practice, and shape their "designerly identity" (or identidad diseñística[9]).

In the case of Argentina—and particularly at the National University of La Plata—this education has been historically shaped by the epistemological legacy of the Modern Movement. With its Eurocentric, rationalist, and Cartesian roots, this paradigm infused design education with ideals of objectivity, universality, and technical progress.[10,11] Despite recent shifts toward more contextual or critical approaches, hegemonic imaginaries persist: siliconized innovation, the decontextualized user, and the promise of scalable impact continue to exert a form of projectual coloniality.[12,13,14]

Entrepreneurship—in its dominant neoliberal form—has spread as a technology of governing subjects,[15,16] promoting a business-oriented morality that permeates work, desire, education, and everyday life. These "technologies of the self" encourage a self-exploiting, meritocratic, and optimized subjectivity, under the promise that everyone can—and must—design their own destiny, regardless of structural constraints.[17,18]

Paradoxically, this apparent freedom proposed by entrepreneurship coincides with the expansion of design as a polyphonic discipline centered on subjectivity. Today, each designer seeks their "own voice" in a field that intersects with management, communication, technology, sustainability, and social transformation.[19] New generations—as Dubet[20] observes—no longer aspire to linear career paths, but to life experiences that integrate work, identity, and personal expression.

This is where relevant points of contact emerge: both contemporary design and entrepreneurship operate as forms of productive self-expression.[21,22] Entrepreneurship can thus be understood as an extension of the designer's biography—a practice through which desires, emotions, values, and life projects are negotiated. From this perspective, we propose that design ventures function as spaces of projectual subjectivation: dispositifs where the designer not only produces objects, but also produces themselves.[23,24]

In this sense, research on the intersection between design and entrepreneurship is key to understanding how professional and existential logics are currently articulated, and how designers exercise agency over

their own becoming. As Ingold[25] suggests, in intellectual or creative practices, there is no separation between work and life: both are mutually implicated as a way of inhabiting the world.
This article, therefore, aims to explore—through the analysis of case studies—how industrial designers who graduated from the Faculty of Arts at the National University of La Plata (FdA-UNLP) reinterpret entrepreneurship in local contexts, and how they deploy alternative discursive cultures to achieve what we call projectual sovereignty.

In doing so, several central questions arise: How can we prevent the discursive scaffolding of design from leading to a homogenization of projectual identities? Is it possible to imagine an emancipated designer-entrepreneur, not subsumed by the market? How are spaces of critical meaning constructed through self-managed practices that subvert hegemonic models of success? These questions do not seek definitive answers, but rather open a repertoire of possible meanings—understanding meaning, in Ezequiel Gatto's terms[26], as that which articulates the sensible, the comprehensible, and the imaginable.

Designing the research: situated methodology and integrated analysis model

This research is framed within the research through design approach—an orientation that understands the act of inquiry as a projectual practice in itself.[27,28] From this perspective, design is not only the object of study, but also a situated mode of knowledge generation, involving reflection in action and the reconfiguration of realities.

The study was structured around an analytical model—the "entrepreneurial triad"—which considers the entrepreneur, their venture, and the ecosystem in which it unfolds.[29] Semi-structured interviews were conducted with designers and other key informants, enabling a detailed reconstruction of entrepreneurial processes.

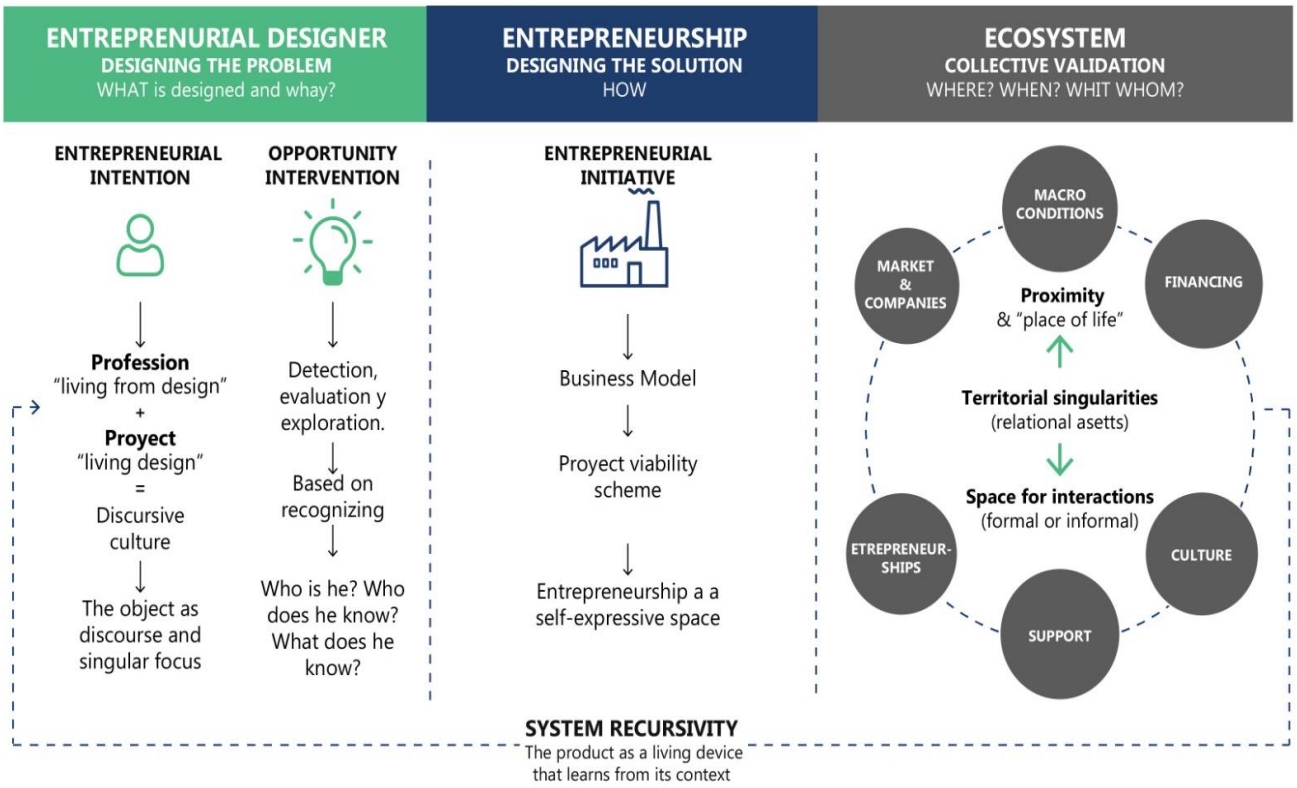
These interviews were not treated as neutral tools, but rather as spaces for narrative co-construction[30], where participants' meanings, tensions, and strategies for sustaining their projects over time were explored.

The resulting narratives offered insight into the dynamics of self-organized work, its entanglement with the entrepreneurs' personal life projects, their diverse discursive cultures, and the ways in which they constructed their own projectual sovereignty.

Figure 1 illustrates the entrepreneurial process as a progressive structure, beginning with the "problem design" stage, which situates the designer's entrepreneurial intention and their interpreted opportunity for intervention. In this phase, the designer's discursive culture also emerges as a key element, shaping both the meaning and motivation behind the initiative.

The second block corresponds to the "solution design" stage, where the how of the design takes form, and the business model or viability scheme that enables its implementation is articulated. The third block defines the projectual context through the concept of the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (EE), emphasizing the ecosystem as a "place of life"—with its territorial specificities and local interactions.[31,32]

Figure 1. Entrepreneurial triad based on the adopted theoretical framework



Source: Own elaboration based on data developed.[9]

Finally, the feedback loop from the ecosystem is conceived as a recursive process, in which the designed entity functions as a living device—one that, through the product's systemic function, is capable of learning from its context and continuously constituting itself.

Diverse ecosystems: entrepreneurial practices through a design lens

Case analysis constitutes a central methodological strategy for exploring complex phenomena in specific contexts.[33,34] In this study, a multiple case design was employed, allowing for the observation of patterns, contrasts, and singularities in entrepreneurial design experiences developed by graduates of the Industrial Design program at the National University of La Plata (UNLP) across various territories in Buenos Aires Province between 2009 and 2019.

Case selection criteria were defined according to four parameters:

- Initiatives with at least three years of sustained activity at the time of the research.
- Ventures led or co-led by UNLP graduates.
- Territorial insertion within the so-called Buenos Aires Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (EEB), following regionalization criteria.[35]
- Projects that go beyond traditional business logic and embody projectual, cultural, and territorial dimensions.

Table 1 summarizes the eight selected experiences, which range from design studios with an artisanal or experimental orientation to technological production companies and institutional spaces for entrepreneurial support. This corpus does not aim to exhaust the existing diversity but rather to offer a representative sample of how industrial design intersects with self-organized practices in non-metropolitan contexts.

Table 1. Selected entrepreneurial cases from the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Case	Initiative & Designer	Start Year	Age	UNLP Graduation	District (Subregion)	Activities
1	Metalúrgica Mangini / Horacio Mangini	2007	52	1995	Tres Lomas (Southwest)	Metalworking industry
2	Cross Molinos / Eduardo Tierno	2009	52	1995	9 de Julio (Center)	Design and manufacturing of grain milling and crushing machines
3	E2 Design / Eugenio Paz	2012	41	2015	Pergamino (Northeast)	Furniture design
4	Las Pulpas / Paz Rossi and Rosario Fuhr	2015	34	2014	La Plata (Capital)	Design and production of footwear and clothing accessories
5	Rmb Soldadura / Mariano Depino	2015	34	2015	Lanús (GBA)	Commercialization of welding equipment
6	Oso Estudio / Pedro Bargo and Carolina Panzone	2016	35	2010	Mar del Plata (Coastal)	Design and manufacturing of ceramic products
7	Dip Estudio en Conjunto / Rodrigo Mené Arcuri	2016	35	2012	Bahía Blanca (South)	Design and biofabrication using 3D printing
8	Mariano Briolotti / Fundación Innovamos	2017	47	2002	Junín (Northwest)	Institutional management for entrepreneurial support

Source: Own elaboration based on data developed.[9]

These initiatives are based in diverse territories—from small districts such as Tres Lomas to larger cities like Bahía Blanca, Pergamino, and Mar del Plata—allowing for the analysis of how entrepreneurial design is reconfigured in relation to available resources, community ties, material languages, and local production scales. Following Manzini[13,36,] this involves understanding design not as a universalist practice, but as a way of inhabiting, caring for, and transforming one's immediate environment.

Moreover, the cases reveal a shift in the conception of entrepreneurship—from a business-centered logic to a life project imbued with meaning, where aesthetic exploration, ethical commitments, political positioning, and strategies for economic sustainability intersect. This shift aligns with contemporary approaches that conceive of design as a practice oriented toward the common good, social sustainability, and professional autonomy.[37,12]

The heterogeneity of the cases also underscores the plurality of projectual styles and the emergence of hybrid figures such as the designer-artisan, the designpreneur, or the community facilitator, challenging conventional classifications of professional practice and opening up new ways of thinking about design education, production, and impact.

Altogether, these cases contribute to a non-centralized, non-extractive understanding of design entrepreneurship, where value lies not only in technological innovation or business model scalability, but in the capacity of projects to articulate meaning, agency, and territorial commitment.

Discursive culture: between being a designer and designing oneself

Design is not only about solving problems, but also about producing meaning, shaping identities, and constructing possible worlds. The dialogue between thinking and doing in the act of designing[38] unfolds as a philosophy of action, in which values, gestures, languages, and aspirations sediment and orient the practice.

In this research, we adopt the concept of discursive culture to describe how designers—coherently or conflictively—integrate their cultural frameworks (how they think about design) and their operative modes (how they practice it), thereby constituting a projectual ethos that interweaves life, work, and subjectivity.

This notion builds upon and expands previous work on design as a situated cultural practice[4,14], and draws inspiration from approaches that conceive of design as a form of self-writing or self-production[23,24]—a process through which the subject transforms while designing and is, in turn, transformed by what they design.

Discursive culture cannot be understood as a fixed set of normative values, but rather as a living, mutable symbolic atmosphere in which designers constantly negotiate their position amid contextual tensions, market demands, ideological horizons, and personal desires. This notion dialectically integrates the being and doing of the discipline, dissolving the boundaries between life and work by intertwining biographical trajectories, ethical values, and ideological sensibilities into a projectual ethos.[24,39]

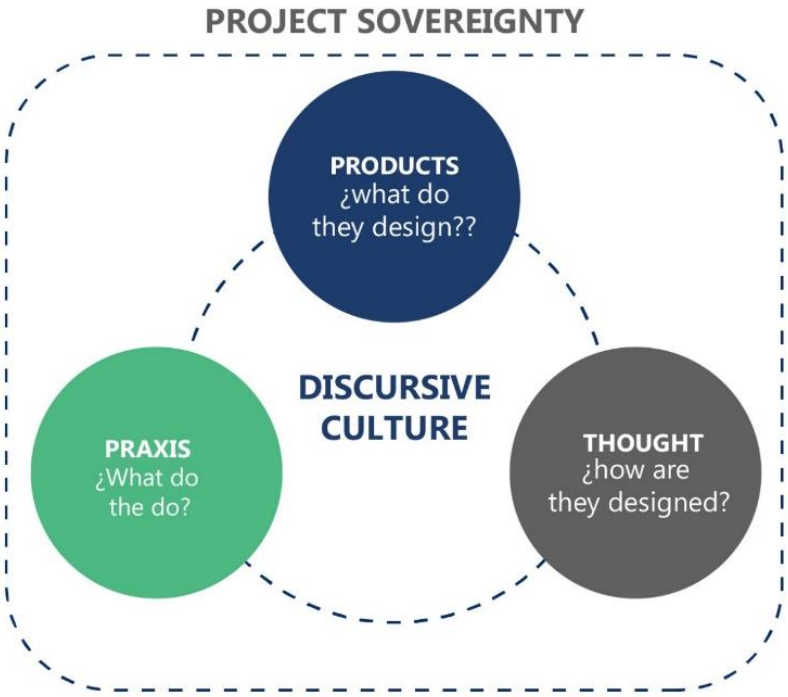
In the case of designer-entrepreneurs, this culture functions as a framework of internal coherence[40] that guides three dimensions:

- The autonomous definition of quality parameters and internal lines of meaning.41
- The proactive problematization of contexts to critically intervene in material culture.
- The construction of narratives that articulate objectives, strategies, and professional identities in tension with hegemonic market logics.[42]

In this sense, the designer-entrepreneur (designpreneur[43]) not only produces artifacts but also designs themselves through a "politics of the everyday"[36], constantly negotiating contradictions between projectual imaginaries and economic pressures.

This dynamic—illustrated in the integrative diagram in **Figure 2**—reveals a living and evolving discursive culture, in which objects act as relational devices that feed back into local ecosystems, while professional identity is continuously reassessed in pursuit of coherence between practices, products, and ways of thinking. Ultimately, discursive culture emerges as a semiotic-material field of tension: a space where not only modes of doing design are contested, but also competing worldviews.[44]

Figure 2. Integrative diagram of Discursive Culture



Source: Own elaboration based on D'Amico.[9]

Projectual sovereignty: critical agency and dimensions of situated practice

The relationship between discursive culture and projectual sovereignty can be understood as a dialectic of critical agency within the field of entrepreneurial design. While the former provides a symbolic and narrative framework that orients practice, the latter refers to designers' capacity for self-determination in the face of normative frameworks, market pressures, and hegemonic discourses. Ultimately, it concerns a form of situated and transformative projectual agency.[14]

We define projectual sovereignty here as the designers' critical capacity to self-manage their creative decisions, productive practices, and horizons of meaning—resisting instrumental logics and affirming their right to intervene in the world through their own narratives. This notion distances itself from any

romanticized ideal of autonomy; rather, it acknowledges that such sovereignty is disputed, negotiated, and constructed under structurally unequal conditions.

Based on the analysis of the case studies, we identify four constitutive dimensions of this projectual sovereignty, which express a shift away from traditional design cultures:

Philosophical Dimension (1). This dimension is reflected in the shift from the question "what to design?" to "why do we design?" This turn implies an ethical and relational orientation, where objects are conceived not only as functional solutions, but as material narratives that express values, worldviews, and narrative intentions.[45]

Interviewees valued the narrative capacity of design[46], associating it with practices such as critical design, speculative design, and cultural activism.[47]

In addition, most designers do not identify with the figure of the entrepreneur in its classical sense. They prefer to position themselves as "designers" in an expanded sense that includes teaching, research, management, experimentation, and symbolic production. In this context, design functions more as a grammar of everyday life than as a business tool.

Territorial Dimension (2). Projectual sovereignty is also rooted in a form of territorial intelligence. The designers interviewed do not design from a universalist perspective, but rather from a close connection with their communities, material languages, trust networks, and local conditions.[48,49]
Territory is understood as a place of life[50], where knowledge, affect, and opportunity converge. This approach reinforces the idea of design as a practice of proximity—both geographic and relational36.
Temporal Dimension (3). This dimension expresses a critique of the accelerated pace imposed by the market. In several cases, there is an explicit will to slow down design and production processes (slow design), prioritizing process quality, closeness to users, and situated learning.[21,51]

This alternative temporality enables artisanal exploration, responsible production, and the conception of the object as a research device.

Productive Dimension (4). The business models examined show small, flexible structures—often informal or emergent—without clearly defined scalability plans. Two major entrepreneurial profiles were identified:

- "Expanded Craft": the re-signification of traditional crafts through design, integrating technical and cultural knowledge.
- "Di-nfluencers": designers who make their everyday practice visible on social media, acting as micro-narrators of their projectual experience.

In both cases, the logic of unlimited growth typical of startups is rejected in favor of singular, sustainable, and meaningful projects. The figure of the "client" gives way to that of the "user" as a co-producer of meaning, revealing a design ethic focused on relationships rather than transactions.
These dimensions reveal a low tolerance for the ethical and symbolic contradictions of market-driven design. Even when professionalism and economic viability are present, the interviewees prioritize internal coherence, projectual expressiveness, and subjective transformation.

In summary, projectual sovereignty emerges as a form of everyday resistance, a way of redesigning practice in dialogue with one's own values, desires, and contexts. It is not a matter of absolute independence, but of the capacity to give meaning to projectual work beyond normative imperatives. In a context of growing precarity, standardization, and productivity pressures, this sovereignty emerges as a political act, a gesture of affirmation, and a commitment to critical professionalism.

Designing through disobedience: projectual emancipation and the critical reappropriation of practice

Within the framework of a critical and decolonial epistemology of design—as the one we propose—it becomes urgent to question not only what and for whom we design, but also from which cultural matrices we do so. The issue lies not only in the objects we produce, but in the ways our professional subjectivities have been shaped by hegemonic structures, often inherited from the Eurocentric modern project.
As authors such as Escobar[12], Ahmed[52], and Santos[53] have pointed out, decolonizing design does not mean replacing one canon with another, but rather opening up a space of continuous interpellation, where the projectual becomes a site of semiotic, symbolic, and political contestation. This demands a dual movement:

1. Denaturalizing the internalized habits acquired through education and professional practice.
2. Activating protocols of projectual resistance that allow for the imagination—and materialization—of alternative ways of designing, living, and producing.

The transition–deconstruction we propose here goes beyond critical introspection. In projectual terms, it is an act of metadesign: a redesignability applied to our own conditions of agency. At this point, we return to von Borries' warning[23]: "bad design can only be criticized with good design". In other words, critique becomes powerful only when translated into practice.

As Ahmed[54] aptly warns, denunciation without transformation risks becoming a narcissism of critique—where discomfort turns into symbolic capital rather than transformative action. Projectual disobedience, then, is expressed through small yet persistent decisions: which materials to use, what tempos to sustain, which scales to adopt, which bodies to include, and which stories to tell.

These microacts of disobedience form the foundation of a projectual emancipation that does not begin with a new manifesto, but with the conscious revision of everyday practice. It is about unlearning through design—or more precisely, designing as a form of unlearning—where each project can operate as a political and subjective experiment.

In this sense, projectual sovereignty is not an abstract ideal but a situated practice—one that brings together the philosophical, the territorial, the temporal, and the political-productive. It is a commitment to the right to imagine one's own futures, and to design—with others—from a place of critical and situated agency.

Thus, the question this work leaves open is not only how we design, but what we are legitimizing when we design in this way. If dominant epistemological frameworks tend to homogenize design identities,

what space remains for divergent voices—those embodied in initiatives that resist, reimagine, and remake the practice?

In a field where design is often proclaimed a tool for transformation, the question is no longer simply whether we are transforming the world, but rather: in what direction, for whom, and with what consequences? The challenge is urgent, and design—when exercised with critical awareness—remains a powerful means of re-narrating the world.

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- Enrique D'Amico: Conceptualization, Research, Methodology, Project Management, Visualization, Writing, Original Draft, Writing, Review and Editing.
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