Exploring Authenticity in Participatory Design (APD)

Towards a Framework of Lived Experience & Relational Ethics in Co-Creation

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Abstract

This exploratory paper examines authenticity as both a value and a practice within Participatory Design (PD). It introduces the *Authenticity in Participatory Design (APD) framework* as a reflective and methodological lens to evaluate the depth and quality of participation. Grounded in two decades of PD, rethinking of Universal Design (UD) / Inclusive Design (ID) [1] and social innovation practice, the APD framework integrates four modes of engagement—Design FOR, WITH, BY, and AS People—to explore how participation becomes authentic through lived experience, ethical reflection, and redistribution of power. Drawing on two practice-led projects in dementia care and criminal justice/prison rehabilitation, the paper argues that authenticity is not a procedural guarantee but a relational, affective, and situated achievement. It emerges when participants/people and designers engage with empathy, vulnerability, and mutual accountability of lived experience. Authenticity, in this view, is a dynamic condition that transforms both process and people, positioning PD as a collective practice of learning to live together differently.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design; Human computer interaction (HCI); Empirical studies in HCI.

Keywords

Authenticity in Participatory Design, Lived Experience, Relational Ethics, Co-Design Frameworks, Social Innovation, Design FOR, WITH, BY, AS People

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1 Introduction: Authenticity and the Participatory Design Ethos

Since its origins in 1970s Scandinavia, Participatory Design (PD) has sought to democratise design by sharing power between experts and those affected by design decisions. Over time, however, 'participation' has become a ubiquitous - and often diluted-term. Many projects perform inclusion procedurally rather than practising it relationally. Against this backdrop, we aim to offer the concept of authenticity a way to re-centre PD's ethical foundations.

This paper introduces the Authenticity in Participatory Design (APD) framework, as both a reflective tool and a conceptual map, it reframes the familiar participatory spectrum proposed by Sanders and Stappers (2008) [2] - Design FOR, WITH, and BY People. By adding a fourth orientation, Design AS People, that explicitly addresses the entanglement of identity, embodiment, and lived experience in co-creation. The paper argues that authenticity restores PD's moral purpose: not only to include people in design, but to design AS people—through relationships that transform everyone involved.

Authenticity here refers to alignment between intention, action, and relationship. Following Taylor (1991), we understand authenticity as co-constructed: a personal voice that remains answerable to others through recognition, dialogue, and ethical commitments [3]. In dialogue with this account, Sherwood (2022) argues that in what she calls a 'counterfeit' culture - where authenticity is continually performed and commodified - reclaiming authenticity is less about proving an inner 'real self' and more about practices of truthfulness and accountability to what is real, shared, and consequential [4]. To ground these relational claims in lived practice, we also draw on Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world (1927), which frames authenticity as an embodied way of living with uncertainty and choosing meaning within concrete situations - rather than an inner feeling or a stable identity [5]. For PD, this means authenticity cannot be guaranteed by methods or checklists; it is achieved in how designers and participants meet one another, acknowledge limits and differences, and remain open to being affected.

The APD framework is a practice-led approach to reflecting on positionality and research practice. It was developed through reflective analysis across social design projects, and here we demonstrate its use through two longitudinal cases (OK Dementia and the Criminal Justic & Prisons Projects), where we held sustained roles as designers, researchers, and facilitators. Our analysis draws on project documentation (field notes, workshop materials, artefacts, photographs, and prior publications) alongside a year-long

Table 1: APD orientations as a non-linear, reflective heuristic

Authenticity in PD (APD) Framework – mode	Purpose and role of authenticity	Representation	Intensity of community engagement	Role of Designers
Design FOR People	Ethics of intention – can be authentic when designers are transparent about interpretive distance, make assumptions visible, and take responsibility for consequences.	Most conventional mode of design practice (representation by designers).	LOW – engagement is primarily consultative. Designers work mainly through research, interpretation, and representation (e.g., interviews, observations), and remain accountable for how others are portrayed.	Designers act on behalf of others, interpreting needs through research and expertise.
Design WITH People	Reciprocity and co-learning – authenticity arises through honest exchange, shared sense-making, and negotiated direction.	Transition from representation to collaboration (co-design in practice).	MEDIUM – designers and participants collaborate through workshops and iteration. Participants influence decisions, while designers often retain responsibility for synthesis and delivery (varies by context).	Designers and participants work side by side, sharing insights and negotiating direction.
Design BY People	Agency and autonomy – authenticity relates to the degree of participant control over goals, criteria, and outcomes, and the conditions that sustain that agency.	Shift of authorship toward participants (community-led design).	HIGH – participants set goals and criteria and lead much of the design work. Designers support with facilitation, mentoring, translation, and technical expertise as needed.	Designers act as facilitators, mentors, translators, or resource providers rather than primary creators.
Design AS People (NEW)	Embodiment, identity, and transformation – authenticity can surface when collaboration changes how people understand themselves and their relationships, without collapsing difference.	Most reflexive and transformative orientation (situated contribution).	VERY HIGH – designers may work from within the issue community through lived experience and/or long-term, accountable involvement. The community's voice remains dominant; designers contribute as allies or members while explicitly maintaining ethical and personal boundaries.	Designers and participants are co-constituted through the design process. Roles can become interwoven through sustained collaboration, while difference and boundaries are respected. Designing becomes a form of identity work and 'relational becoming'.

cycle of joint reflection. We use the APD modes as a sensitising lens to examine when participation was experienced as more or less authentic, with particular attention to how roles, power, and responsibilities shifted over time.

2 The APD framework: Design FOR, WITH, BY, and AS people

Whereas Sanders and Stappers describe FOR/WITH/BY as a continuum of participation, the APD framework treats these as orientations that can overlap, recur, and shift over time. It is not a maturity ladder (more participation is not automatically 'better' or more authentic). Instead, it helps designers reflect on intention, reciprocity, agency, and embodiment, and on how power and responsibility are redistributed. In this sense, the framework functions less as a taxonomy and more as a compass for navigating authenticity in situated relationships (see Table 1).

2.1 Design FOR People: Ethics of Intention

Design FOR People remains indispensable in many contexts - policy, architecture, or healthcare - where participation may be constrained by safety or scale. Yet its authenticity depends on reflexive intention. Ehn (2008) [6] argued that even within expert-led projects, designers can democratise knowledge by exposing their choices to scrutiny. In the APD framework, authenticity within 'Design For'

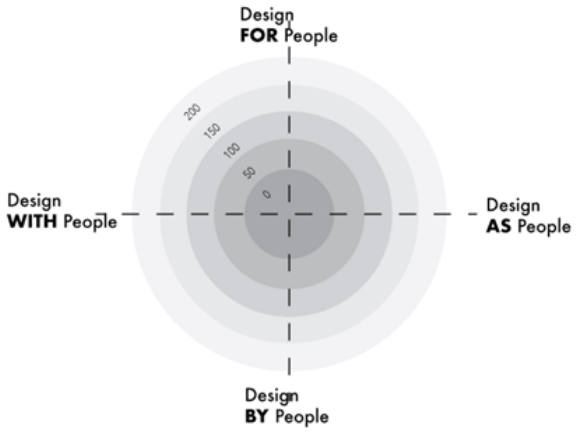


Figure 1: Design FOR/WITH/BY/AS PEOPLE ©Yanki Lee 2026

is not measured by inclusion but by accountability: whether designers acknowledge power asymmetries and engage ethically with the people they claim to represent. It recognises that some design work must be done for but insists that it be done *with awareness.*

2.2 Design WITH People: Reciprocity and Co-Learning

Design WITH People depends on the willingness of designers to listen and adapt, of participants to engage actively in shaping outcomes and an understanding that this reciprocity is never perfectly balanced. Institutional, cultural, and temporal constraints often shape identities and also whose voices are heard. Authenticity in this mode depends on the honesty of the encounter: acknowledging difference rather than pretending equality. Following Light and Akama (2014) [7], authentic participation is relational, not procedural - it lives in the *quality of attention* exchanged between people. Practically, 'Design WITH' requires scaffolding spaces for dialogue, improvisation, and iterative sense-making. Its authenticity is most visible when participants begin to influence design decisions meaningfully and when uncertainty is treated not as a failure but as evidence of shared ownership.

2.3 Design BY People: Agency and Autonomy

Design BY People aligns with Manzini's (2015) [8] conception of social innovation by communities, where design's role is to support local capacities rather than deliver external solutions. Authentic 'Design BY' practices often emerge in grassroots or activist contexts where communities take collective ownership of design processes. Yet this autonomy is fragile. Without institutional support, projects risk fading once funding ends or leadership changes. Authenticity thus depends not only on empowerment but on context and sustainability - whether systems of support enable participants' continued agency after the designer's departure.

2.4 Design AS People: Embodiment, Identity, and Transformation

Design AS People resonates with Latour's (2005) [9] actor-network theory and Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) [10] ethics of care, which view design as a distributed practice of world-making among humans and non-humans. To design *AS* people is to design with awareness of one's interdependence - with other bodies, materials, systems, and stories, and not to speak without them or try to take their role. A clear example of this was the 2015 USA case of Rachel Dolezal[1] who raised controversy, when she as a white woman presented herself as black to lead a NAACP chapter, sparking widespread disgust and debate about race, over-identification and unethical and undemocratic cultural appropriation. Authentic participation here is not merely collaborative but is performative, but ethically situated, and democratically negotiated regarding how participants understand themselves and their identity and place within the collective group.

3 Authenticity as Movement Across Modes

We propose that the APD framework helps conceptualise authenticity as movement between these orientations. Most PD projects traverse multiple modes: they may begin FOR communities (e.g., policy- or institution-led), evolve WITH them through dialogue, create conditions for communities to lead BY their own design, and sometimes culminate in moments of AS - shared reflection, solidarity, or identity shift. Importantly, these transitions are rarely clean or linear. Projects often oscillate, overlap modes, or move 'backwards' due to access, risk, organisational constraints, and changing capacities of participants. Authenticity therefore emerges less at fixed endpoints and more in the messy transitions: in how roles shift, how tensions are negotiated, and how relationships are sustained - or repaired -over time. In practice, this movement can be visualised as a cycle (figure 1) rather than a ladder as Sanders and Stappers (2014) [11] explained, echoing the iterative nature of action research. Each passage between modes demands different ethical capacities - humility when designing FOR; affective as well as cognitive empathy when designing WITH, trust when designing BY, and the courage to do something about the pain of others when designing AS. The APD framework helps practitioners trace how authenticity ebbs and flows throughout participation, offering a shared language for discussing what it means to design genuinely with others.

Synthesising these views, authenticity is situated, relational, and affective - a quality of co-existence rather than a procedural benchmark. It invites PD to move beyond inclusion metrics toward reflective, caring, and context-aware collaboration. The APD framework represents both a theoretical model and a methodological artefact: a synthesis of action, reflection, and co-creation. It provides PD researchers and practitioners with a structure for evaluating identity politics or whether participation occurred by preferred people,

[1]Nkechi Amare Diallo (born Rachel Anne Dolezal;[fn1] November 12, 1977) is an American activist, author, and former college instructor known for presenting herself as a black woman despite being born to white parents. Dolezal was president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane,Washington from 2014 until June 2015, when she resigned in the midst of controversy over her racial identity. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_Dolezal

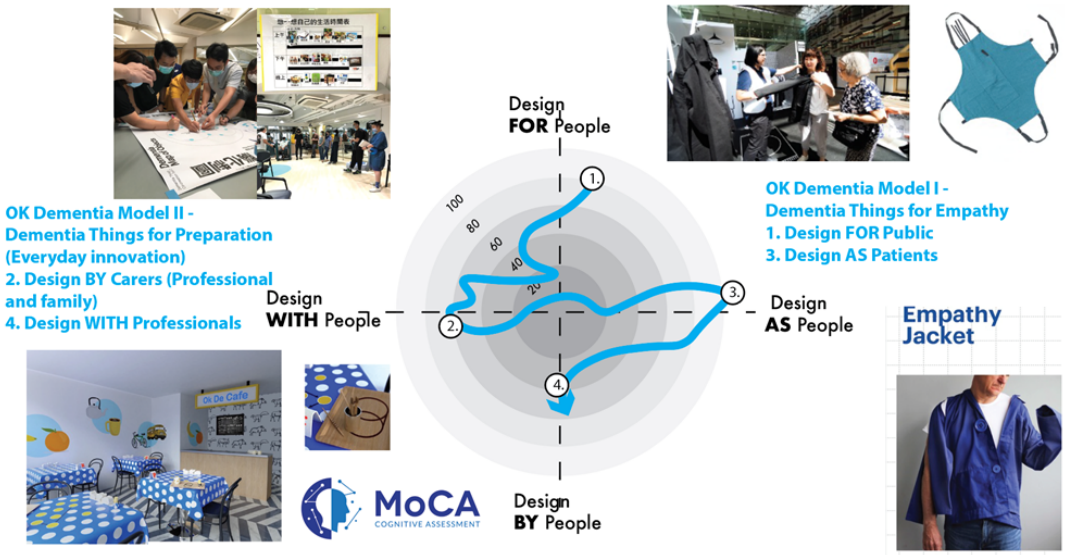


Figure 2: OK Dementia's progression across APD stages: from Stage 1 (Design FOR the public) to Stage 2 (collaborating WITH professionals), through immersion AS patients, and toward Stage 4 (enabling Design BY patients and carers grounded in lived experience). ©Enable Foundation/Yanki Lee 2026.

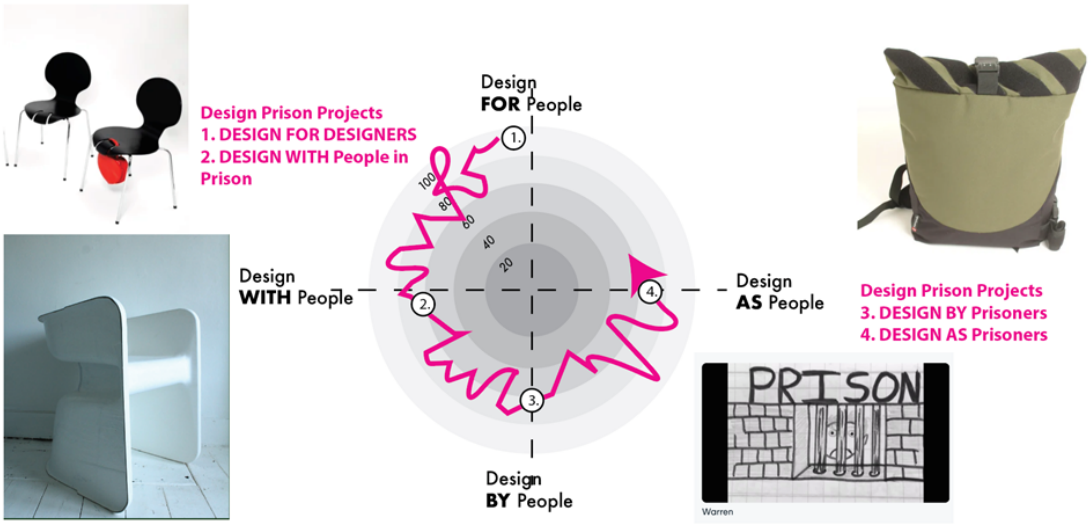


Figure 3: Criminal Justice and Prisons Projects progression across APD stages: from Stage 1 (Design FOR designers) to Stage 2 (Design WITH people in prison), and toward Stage 3 (Design BY prisoners, led by a prisoner-turned-designer) and Stage 4 (Design AS). ©Design Against Crime Research Lab, Central saint martins, University of the Arts / Lorraine Gamman 2026.

but how participation felt, how it shifted relationships, and *what* ethical transformations it produced.

4 Illustrative cases: Dementia and Prison Design

The APD framework gains meaning only when tested in lived practice. Two longitudinal projects, both starting from 2015 - *OK Dementia* and what we are calling the *Criminal Justice & Prisons*

Projects - serve here as exemplary terrains for examining how authenticity unfolds across complex, ethically charged contexts. Both case studies evolved over several years (or draw on a longer history) through partnerships between designers, community organisations, and participants whose lives were directly shaped by the issues at stake. Each case demonstrates that authenticity is not an abstract virtue but a situated negotiation, constantly re-made through time, emotion, and institutional constraint

4.1 OK Dementia: Living with dementia as lived-experience to inspire new everyday practice

The *OK Dementia* [12] began in 2015 as part of a broader initiative to raise public awareness about dementia through design. In Figure 2, there is the initial phase aligned with Design FOR People (medical and social experts): designers created empathy artefacts - such as the *Dementia Shirt*, *Confusion Apron*, and *Sensory Goggles* - that mimicked disorientation and sensory loss. Showcased in galleries and community centres, these artefacts successfully provoked discussion but also revealed ethical tensions. Visitors often left with pity rather than understanding; carers questioned whether such simulations truly honoured the lived experience of dementia.

Through reflective dialogue, the team recognised that authenticity could not be achieved through representation alone. Empathy tools, though well-intentioned, risked aestheticizing vulnerability. The next phase therefore shifted toward Design WITH People. Co-design workshops invited dementia consultants, carers, relatives, and occupational therapists, and - where appropriate - people living with dementia in early stages who wished and were able to participate. In the account presented here, direct participation by people with dementia was necessarily limited and uneven across activities, highlighting that designing 'AS' is not always possible when communication and autonomy are reduced. The design space itself transformed - from exhibition to living room, from spectacle to conversation. Participants contributed their own sensory and narrative artefacts: objects of memory, gestures of care, and routines of everyday life.

Reflecting through the APD lens, OK Dementia demonstrates a full cycle of authenticity: beginning FOR with simulation, moving with through dialogue, enabling BY via participant authorship, and achieving moments of AS through embodied empathy for all. Authentic participation here became a process of mutual unlearning - abandoning the illusion of 'understanding dementia' and instead embracing its ambiguity as creative ground.

4.2 Criminal Justice & Prisons Projects – Reinterpreting Social Justice Through Co-Designing

Where *OK Dementia* unfolded in domestic and community contexts, the *Criminal Justice & Prisons Projects* (Since 2015) [13] confronted one of the most restricted and politicised design environments: the penal system. Initiated in collaboration with correctional institutions and NGOs supporting re-entry, the programme sought to explore how design could improve well-being and dignity within carceral settings.

In Figure 3, it shows the early-stage engagement that resembled Design FOR People: designers spoke to many people (including prisoners) in early 2000 in order to better understand bag theft, how perpetrator techniques emerged to try to thwart this crime through design of café chairs that lead to the misuse and abuse of bags left on such chairs. It took 15 years (and a letter to the prime minister) for the design team to get access to prison, involve prisoners, and create work that went beyond just commenting on how crime occurs. The project went on to generate and co-design their own solutions against crime. The *Makeright Project* (2015-19) saw prisoners co-designing bags to protect people from crime (Design WITH People). Later at another prison (on cell furniture project 2018-2022) the design research team was invited in to study spatial layouts of cells and daily routines of prisoners to produce safer cell furniture. Early prototypes of ergonomic furniture, redesigned cell storage etc - found students responding to official briefs we gave them but working outside of prison offering little agency to incarcerated people themselves (Design FOR people). Authenticity, in this phase of furniture design, remained aspirational; participation of prisoners constrained by access.

Gradually, through informal interactions and trust-building, the design research team managed to gain direct access to prisoners. shifting our focus again towards Design WITH People. Small creative workshops were held in education units in prison where inmates as co-creators explored design through drawing, model-making, and storytelling. These sessions were specific about prisoners' needs from cell furniture but often became emotional, revealing memories of homes, families, and futures imagined beyond incarceration. Authenticity manifested in moments of shared vulnerability: when participants articulated their experiences without fear of institutional judgement, and when designers acknowledged their own discomfort and partial understanding, and development of mutual understanding. This meant later together the whole team generated designs (including the Flip chair) delivered as co-design (design BY) prisoners.

A further transformation occurred when a former inmate was invited to join the facilitation team after release, and a PhD student with lived experience of prison was funded to work alongside the team as a Research Fellow. Their lived experience as *'credible messengers*[2]*'* [14] enabled further development of the Design BY People who had been in or were in collaborating further with inmates in prison, extending the bag and furniture focus to include digital storytelling by prisoners of their experiences. Here participatory re-imagining of futures after prison focused on dignity and connection. Authenticity here meant redistributed authorship: the design narrative was no longer written about prisoners but by them.

Here, the programme cultivated instances of Design AS People. One facilitator described engaging with design as 'a language to translate what we felt inside into something constructive.' This expression captures the performative dimension of authenticity: through creative action, prisoners re-defined themselves not as offenders but as designers, researchers and subsequently mentors. The design research team also began to work in an 'AS' orientation

[2]Credible messengers are individuals who possess authentic lived experience and social legitimacy within a particular community, enabling them to effectively engage, influence, and support others through trust-based relationships—recognized especially in contexts such as violence reduction, youth mentoring, and criminal justice reform.

- seeking alignment through accountable, sustained collaboration, while recognising difference - co-creating the design of objects (cell furniture using expert skills required to finalize prototyping). These shifts, however, remained precarious. Institutional hierarchies could easily reverse progress; funding cycles for the roles were short and public stigma persistent. Authenticity thus appeared as momentary coherence within an otherwise fragmented system - a fragile but transformative alignment of trust, voice, and purpose. Through the APD lens, the Criminal Justice & Prisons Projects exposes the structural limits of participatory authenticity. Whereas OK Dementia operated in relatively open community spaces, prison design demanded continuous negotiation with authority.

Authenticity often had to be smuggled in through micro-encounters: a design conversation that turned into mutual recognition, a workshop where rules briefly loosened or where the credible messengers help establish trust that brought forward deeper discussion. These moments mattered precisely because they were temporary. They exemplify what Haraway (1988) [15] might call *'situated authenticity'* - truth-saying that exists within, not outside, conditions of power.

4.3 Comparative Reflection

Together, these cases show that authenticity in PD cannot be standardised or guaranteed. It depends on the interplay between structural possibility and relational care. OK Dementia demonstrates authenticity as emergent solidarity - how everyday acts of making and storytelling can build communities of empathy. The Criminal Justice & Prisons Projects illustrates authenticity as resistance within constraint - how even brief encounters of trust can challenge oppressive systems.

Across both, authenticity is inseparable from temporality: it takes time to emerge, yet can disappear instantly. It is produced through affect - through laughter, hesitation, anger, and gratitude - and through the courage to stay with complexity. These projects, viewed through the APD framework, affirm that design's most authentic moments occur not at the polished end of a project but in the messy, relational middle where power, care, and creativity collide.

5 Discussion: What Makes Participation Authentic?

Authenticity in Participatory Design (APD) is not a property of tools or outcomes; it is a relational quality that emerges when people co-create meaning with openness and care. It requires recognising identity differences and power relations, while still finding workable ways to act together. Analysis of the two cases suggests four interlinked conditions that help participation feel genuine:

Relational openness sets the tone. Authenticity begins when designers and participants collaborate without certainty, allowing emotion, disagreement, and learning to shape direction and enabling 'relational becoming' (Marttila et al., 2025) [16]. In *OK Dementia*, this shift emerged when designers stopped framing dementia as a problem and listened more deeply to lived experience; in the *Criminal Justice & Prisons Projects*, when inmates were recognised as knowledge-holders and co-creators rather than reduced to the stigma of criminals.

Distributed authorship shares ownership. Authenticity grows as participants gain real influence over ideas and narratives, and see their perspectives carried through into outcomes. It replaces singular designer authority with shared interpretation and responsibility.

Situated power awareness keeps hierarchy visible. Participation never fully escapes asymmetries of role, status, or access. Authenticity depends on noticing and negotiating these dynamics - clarifying who speaks for whom and how decisions are made.

Embodied vulnerability and reflection sustain trust. Participation feels genuine when people risk uncertainty, acknowledge limits, and reflect together on what felt authentic - or not. This ongoing attention keeps ethical awareness active and relationships resilient over time.

Together these conditions form an ecology of authenticity. They remind us that participation is most real not when it is perfectly managed, but when it remains responsive to tension and transformation - when design becomes a site for mutual becoming rather than managed inclusion.

6 Conclusion

Authenticity in Participatory Design (APD) is not a fixed achievement but a living relationship - a continual negotiation of trust, care, and meaning. The APD framework reframes participation as a relational spectrum - Design FOR, WITH, BY, and AS People - showing how ethical depth shifts with agency and perspective. Across the action-research cycles and case studies, authenticity was what moved participation from inclusion toward co-existence. It surfaced in dialogue, vulnerability, and shared authorship rather than in predetermined outcomes, reminding us that design's power lies less in artefacts or policies than in reconfiguring relationships between people, institutions, and the worlds they inhabit.

For practitioners, APD offers a practical way to work with complexity without reducing it. It can help to: (A) map which orientations are active and make voice and influence visible; (B) support transitions through regular check-ins on roles, consent, authorship, and care; (C) strengthen participant agency through shared criteria for success and access to resources; and (D) hold ethical boundaries when designing 'AS' by naming limits, avoiding over-identification, and staying accountable to the community. Used this way, APD treats artefacts, services, and policies as means for reshaping relationships with dignity and mutual responsibility.

Ultimately, authenticity restores PD's ethical and philosophical core: designing AS people—not above or FOR others, but WITH and through (BY) them. When participation risks becoming instrumental, authenticity renews PD's promise as relational ethics, collective learning, and shared becoming. This requires ethical reckoning and accountability: a willingness to surface assumptions, name asymmetries, and take responsibility for what design sets in motion. Authenticity cannot be certified in advance; it is the lived, relational outcome of that ongoing accounting - felt in how people meet, what they carry together, and what they are willing to change.

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