

Call for papers
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IMPERMANENCE.

An Alternative Design Narrative in the Souths of the World

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“Flowers decompose, but knowing this does not prevent us from loving them. In fact, we can love them even more because we know how to treasure them while they are still alive. If we learn to look at a flower in such a way that it reveals its impermanence to us, its death will not make us suffer”.

Thich Nhat Hanh

“But why have they destroyed it so? Why? Why did the olive trees, the sun, the cicadas represent sleep, abandonment, resignation, and misery, and now here, instead, men have built an immense cathedral of metal and glass to unleash within it the fiery monster called steel, which means life”.

Dino Buzzati

Introduction

Impermanence defines our time, yet we experience it unconsciously. As a result, we endure it passively, without significant distress – unless it affects us personally, at which point it turns into suffering. In this way, we forgo the profound acceptance found in Buddhism and Hinduism, which embrace impermanence as both a value and an opportunity. We fail to recognize impermanence in climate change, despite its devastating consequences, or in the instability of geopolitical structures that have shaped the world since the end of World War II. These structures, now in crisis, fuel new conflicts, disrupting a global order where wars once remained on the distant periphery. Overwhelmed by events, we struggle to cultivate critical thought. Our immersion in the digital world has conditioned us to an almost symptomless acceptance of impermanence, without ever truly acknowledging it. The fleeting nature of online interactions – where images and texts appear and vanish in an instant – has reshaped even our human relationships, increasingly confined to virtual spaces. Art and culture have also played a role, training even the most discerning minds to embrace the ephemeral nature of performances, events, and temporary exhibitions. Similarly, design has long been shifting its focus away from physical objects and artifacts, instead centering on service ecosystems, design thinking, and planet-centered approaches.

If it is true that a certain kind of impermanence, due to its intrinsically dual nature, seems to characterize the city – not only the “floating” Venice, “[...] a metaphor for an impermanent world or a ‘double’ life [...]” (Maffesoli, 2000, p. 96), but the city as a mythical place of modernity, projected into a continuous process of transformation –

then the rest of the world (the rural, archaic world of villages) would instead appear immutable, in line with the now outdated antinomic pair of city and countryside. However, on closer inspection, even these peripheral areas, situated on the edge of the world and at the margins of modernity, must confront their own impermanence, brought about by depopulation processes – even those that are daily and non-definitive – or by the influx of tourists and migrants. This erosion – far more profound than in cities, albeit less ostentatious – undermines the strengths of these communities: their (presumed) identity, their ancestral heritage, their traditions. In response, these communities engage in a strenuous effort to reaffirm their roots. Yet impermanence is the “tragic feeling of life” (Maffesoli, p. 44), and even the notion of rootedness carries a duality. When discussing the phenomenon of wandering, Maffesoli (2000) refers to “[...] ‘dynamic rootedness’. This is a bipolarity that magnificently explains the paradoxical antagonism of every existence. One belongs to a place and, from that place, forms connections, but for both to fully assume their meaning, they must, whether in reality or illusion, be denied, surpassed, transgressed. This is a sign of the tragic feeling of existence: nothing is resolved in a synthetic overcoming, but everything is lived in a state of tension, of permanent incompleteness” (p. 82).

It is precisely this “permanent incompleteness” that turns our gaze toward the Global South. But which South?

The complex issue of the Global South is inextricably linked to Western colonialism, which “[...] took on a new form starting from the discovery of America and the classification of other populations as ‘savages’ and therefore enslavable [...]” (Calloni & Cedroni, 2012, p. 141), weakening, uprooting, and pushing ancient cultures to the margins of a new world order. Quoting the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the authors of a 2022 academic article argue that “[the] matrix of coloniality [...] suppresses forms of knowledge and worlds that do not conform to the idea of Euro-modernity [introducing that system of hierarchies which has] over time, become the Trojan horse for carrying out Eurocentric projects of ‘civilization’, ‘modernization’, and ‘development’ across the planet”. They further state that “coloniality has not only operated outside Europe – on the ridge of colonial difference – but also within it, at its ‘margins’, on the ridge of imperial difference [...]” (Cazzato & D’Autilia, 2020, p. 53).

The opposition between wealthy, developed areas and poor, underdeveloped ones – between the advanced northwest and the backward southeast of Europe, between

the industrialized north and the lagging south (as in the case of Italy) – ultimately aligns with a broader “Capitalocene” project¹. This dynamic led, for example, to the construction of the Italsider plant in Taranto, Puglia (Italy) in 1962, where former peasants, who found employment there, became what Walter Tobagi² described as “[...] *metalmezzadri*: half peasants and half metalworkers, no longer farmers but not yet fully industrial workers. In short, they were a strange and bizarre copy of the men of the North” (Cazzato & D’Autilia, p. 57). Here, Cazzato and D’Autilia highlight the existence of multiple Souths of the world – not just Africa – which, at various latitudes, experience a similar top-down development model imposed by the North, aimed at awakening them from their “ancient slumber”. This includes those Souths that are “[...] part of the North of the world, but an imperfect North [...]” (p. 54).

According to the first of the three paradigms studied by Franco Cassano in *Tre modi di vedere il Sud*, the notion of “delay”, attributed to those territories that slow down progress, does not stem from “a solidaristic or redistributive impulse” but rather from the interests of dominant regions. These regions tend to integrate the South into a position of subordination – at best, seeing it as “an eternally undisciplined and unprepared student” – while pushing it toward modernization in line with the principles of progressive universalism. Over the past thirty-five years, the spread of neoliberalism has further shifted the blame for underdevelopment onto the South itself. As a result, the reduction of state intervention, the rejection of so-called welfare dependency, and the increase in competition have become the cornerstones of a new paradigm of delay, one that ostensibly allows the “best”, the most productive individuals – those who have succeeded through their own efforts – to emerge. This approach is, to some extent, softened by rewarding “virtuous localism” and celebrating small, self-sufficient communities. However, the “market fundamentalism” of the neoliberal model remains far removed from the “universalist models of welfare”. According to the third paradigm, that of “autonomy”, the representation of the South as a “pathological condition” is totally questioned because it is the result of a “cultural construction” elaborated by the “stronger subject” (Cassano, 2009, pp. 37-51). By overturning the paradigm of delay, Cassano (2009) proposes a new idea of the South, whose key dimension “[...] lies in the conviction that it is possible to build a different concept of wealth – one independent

¹ It would be reductive to think that 21st-century colonialism – exercised by the wealthy at the expense of the poor – does not have repercussions on climate change and the broader living conditions of the planet. Jason W. Moore’s critique of the concept of the Anthropocene, coined by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen in 2002, is that this new post-Holocene era is not driven by humanity in general but specifically by capitalism. For this reason, Moore refers to it as the *Capitalocene* – a term first used in 2009 by Swedish human ecologist Andreas Malm, then a doctoral student at Lund University.

² Italian journalist and writer.

of the endless pursuit of private profits and appropriation, rich in common goods [...] Development can follow paths other than those already known, and autonomy must take on the task of reconstructing original trajectories and reinterpreting traditions in a new and open way [...]” (p. 55).

Cassano’s reflections conclude here with the assertion that there is not just one South, warning against an easy “exaltation of marginality” and a “[...] eulogy that idealizes the South, depicting it as if it were a compact and unified entity” (p. 70). He continues, stating that “[...] a large part of the South [...] is not outside modernity but rather occupies its basements [...]” (p. 70).

Considering how, in light of the most recent postcolonial critique, the concept of modernity has been subjected to deconstruction, Cecilia Pennacini (2019), in her introduction to Jean and John L. Comaroff’s³ *Theory from the South*, writes that “In this spirit, the Comaroffs [oppose] the Eurocentric idea of a universal modernity with the image of multiple or alternative modernities [which] today allows us to recognize the desire of the inhabitants of disadvantaged regions to shape their own personal versions of modernity [...] challenging the presumed unidirectionality of North-South flows of ideas [...]” and, through their work, develop a counter-evolutionary perspective (pp. 20-21).

The qualities of impermanence in the “Souths of the world” seem to coincide with an “a-modern” sense of measure, a composed moderation, a fundamental tendency to remain hidden – or to present themselves without ostentation, as defined realities.

“‘Being-present-while-disappearing’ is the condition of a living ghost, one that has things to do and sorrows to endure, but the unique perspective is that of someone who is at once outside & inside. It is the situation of those who exist in impermanence, who search in darkness, who find reasons to laugh (even) in unhappiness. The unspoken joy of having no prospects and of discovering how precious the SCRAPS are” (Caliandro, 2018).

With this call, we aim to investigate how design – specifically, a design in search of new innovative pathways – can find legitimacy within the fundamental impermanence of those territories that are not only geographically located in the South but can be found at all latitudes. These “Souths” of the world also exist within the “Norths” of the world – in the wealthy cities of the West or in the opulent urban centers of regions striving to resemble the West, firmly fixated on their solidity and certainties.

³ Anthropologists and honorary professors at the University of Cape Town.

Topics

- **Design and Resilience: Facing Uncertainty in the Global Souths**
 - Design practices of resilience and adaptation to the socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges in the Global South
 - Between uncertainty and impermanence, design seeks sustainable and adaptive solutions
- **Reuse and Revitalization: Design Practices in Impermanent Contexts**
 - Reuse and urban revitalization as design strategies in the Global South
 - Lasting solutions in fragile or rapidly changing contexts born from design that knows how to exploit limited resources and waste materials
- **Aesthetics of Impermanence: Design and Material Culture in the Global South**
 - Aesthetics of impermanence, the transient, and the ephemeral in the design cultures of the Global South
 - Changes in materials, forms, and design practices in dialogue with local craftsmanship
- **Social Transformations and Design: Reflections on Fluidity, Identity, and Modernity**
 - The relationship between design and local cultures in response to rapid social changes in the Global Souths
 - Co-learning, co-creation, and the use of open technologies as responses to local needs and rapid transformations in the Global South

Important dates

- **April 4, 2025** → launch of the call for papers;
- **June 27, 2025** → full paper submission (from 10 to 20 pages);
- **September 26, 2025** → full paper notification;
- **December 29, 2025** → final paper submission;
- **January 26, 2026** → final paper notification.

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