



Research through Designers: A pictorial reflection on engagements, encounters, and environments at a design research jamboree

Downloaded from: <https://research.chalmers.se>, 2026-10-16 20:10 UTC

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Berger, A., Weller, J., Sturdee, M. et al (2024). Research through Designers: A pictorial reflection on engagements, encounters, and environments at a design research jamboree. Proceedings of Drs, 2024. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.210>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Jun 23rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 28th, 5:00 PM

Research through Designers: A Pictorial Reflection on Engagements, Encounters, and Environments at a Design Research Jamboree

Arne Berger
Hochschule Anhalt, Germany

Julia Weller
Artist, Germany

Miriam Sturdee
University of St Andrews, UK

David Philip Green
UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Lancaster, UK

Jesse Josua Benjamin
Lancaster University, UK

See next page for additional authors.
Follow this and additional works at: <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Citation

Berger, A., Weller, J., Sturdee, M., Philip Green, D., Josua Benjamin, J., Soro, A., Gamboa, M., and Lindley, J. (2024) Research through Designers: A Pictorial Reflection on Engagements, Encounters, and Environments at a Design Research Jamboree, in Gray, C., Ciliotta Chehade, E., Hekkert, P., Forlano, L., Ciuccarelli, P., Lloyd, P. (eds.), *DRS2024: Boston*, 23–28 June, Boston, USA. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.210>

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the DRS Conference Proceedings at DRS Digital Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in DRS Biennial Conference Series by an authorized administrator of DRS Digital Library. For more information, please contact dl@designresearchsociety.org.

Authors

Arne Berger, Julia Weller, Miriam Sturdee, David Philip Green, Jesse Josua Benjamin, Alessandro Soro, Mafalda Gamboa, and Joseph Lindley

Research through Designers: A pictorial reflection on engagements, encounters, and environments at a design research jamboree

Arne Berger^{a,*}, Julia Weller^b, Miriam Sturdee^c, David Philip Green^d, Jesse Josua Benjamin^e, Alessandro Soro^f, Mafalda Gamboa^g, Joseph Lindley^e

^a Hochschule Anhalt, Germany

^b Artist, Germany

^c University of St Andrews, United Kingdom

^d UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Lancaster, United Kingdom

^e Lancaster University, United Kingdom

^f Queensland University of Technology, Australia

^g Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden

*Corresponding e-mail: arne.berger@hs-anhalt.de

doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.210

Abstract: We picture design researchers' engagement with the task of capturing the value of Research through Design during a week-long event. The images are selected to document set and setting, hands-on activities, human and more-than-human encounters, and material engagements with the theories, methods, and practices of design research. The text is deliberately minimal, offering contextualization from the photographer and the organizer of the event, as well as commentary from attendees on material outcomes and bodily presences; context and environment, disciplinary aesthetics; and social commentary from two non-attendees. We offer this record of process to inspire design researchers to further engage with practical, hands-on, personal, bodily reflective engagements of what it means to do design research. We also aim to advance further the form of primarily photographic pictorials in design research.

Keywords: pictorial, research through design, reflection, design research, conference, hands-on, social commentary, record of process, record of concept

1. Introduction

We present black and white photographs and short explanations as photographic contributions to document the Design Research Jamboree, where design researchers met for five days, collaboratively and materially pondering the task of capturing the value of Research through Design (RtD). This pictorial starts with a short contextualization of the purpose of the Jamboree from its organizer (last author) and methodological considerations from the



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence.

photographer (first author). Next are all images with short descriptions and ALT-text as a second layer. Lastly, comments, in a variety of formats, from both attendees and non-attendees are presented. The point of these images is to serve as contributions in themselves and to offer multiple layers of meaning and action in bodies, material, context, and environments. While we propose these images for design researchers to derive principles and actions for future design research gatherings and inspire personal encounters in design and academia that go beyond conferences (Gamboa 2022), we invite viewers to bring their own interpretations. Our approach is exploratory and dialogical, but it also intends to bring new perspectives on RtD to an informed audience through a primarily photographic pictorial (Blevins 2015).

1.1. How do these images reveal the spirit of the Jamboree?

When asked why their annual meeting was called a Jamboree, Baden Powell, founder of the scouting movement, replied, “What else would you call it?”. The same spirit lies behind the naming of the Jamboree depicted in this paper. This Jamboree was a 5-day residential event hosted by Design Research Works, which sought to capture the value of Research through Design and take steps towards empowering this community of research and practice. The event was not a conference, symposium, colloquium, or workshop; it was a Jamboree. The unfamiliar and slightly funny name helped participants and organizers suspend expectations for what the event could be. Concrete outcomes were planned. In particular, a chapter plan, lectures, collaborative sketching, a taxonomy for Design Research, and engagements with more-than-human encounters. Still, the pathways to achieve them were deliberately kept flexible. The Jamboree sought to take advantage of participants being co-located without external distractions. It strove to disrupt preconceptions of more common retreats and an acceptance that this Jamboree would also be temporary.

The images in this pictorial are intended to capture and reveal the spirit of the Jamboree. We present them here to share it, invite others into it, and extend it. The following images visualize the contrasts and juxtapositions that, at the event, cohered to create a sense of ‘jamboree-ality’. One necessary aspect of this was intense and extended periods of concentration which each individual lived out in silence but with physical togetherness. Through the week, those solemn moments of singularity were punctuated by louder, longer, more exploratory, and generative chapters fueled through fusions and fissions of opinions on the core matter(s).

The Jamboree also required participants to navigate and negotiate their collective thoughts via myriads of means of expression: diagrams, sculptures, illustrations, maquettes, photographs, collection-of-moss and speculated alternate realities. Words were spoken, marks made, landscapes adapted, and photons committed to digital memory. These ‘nuggets’ of jamboree-ality can be seen in this pictorial and were the currency of the event’s commons. It was no accident that all of this happened in an area of countryside within the United Kingdom’s Lake District National Park that is rural, calm, and pretty. Tastes of the environment’s beauty make their way into the pictorial. However, it is the people, their interactions, and

resultant sparks that are the subject here. The photographs collected here aspire to reveal some of the spirit of the Jamboree. An amalgam of the individual realities of attendees; the gamut of the emotional and phenomenological journeys; and the breadth of the things and thoughts we created.

1.2. Methodological considerations

The invitation to the Jamboree encouraged all participants to exercise some form of creative practice during the week. The first author decided to take part in the Jamboree and photograph it simultaneously. He is an avid travel documentary photographer and published concert photographer, productively exploiting the tension of simultaneously being part-of and not being part of happenings. He sneaked into rooms when everyone left for the day and took a step back, when everyone was involved. All photographs were taken by him. Notably, many of the selected images tell stories of interactions, but rarely from within.

All images were taken with a Fuji X camera and a Fuji X 2.0/23mm lens. The APS-C X-Trans sensor was set to simulate the classic Acros Fujifilm, reproducing extremely fine grain while adding analogue film-like texture to low-light areas. Images were minimally post-processed with Adobe Lightroom, emphasizing pleasant rendering on Macbook displays. Some images have been slightly cropped.

Out of 650 images shot, the first and second authors pre-selected 120 for attendees to mark any undesired images for exclusion from publication. After this, the first author proposed a preliminary selection and layout and prompted the main organizer (last author), attendees and non-attendees to write short commentaries on this selection.

~

Next are 23 photographs of the Design Research Jamboree.



Figure 1 How do we work with the things we leave behind? For others to find, collect, clean away or discard. The distinction between inside and outside offers potential, but also asks for interaction as labor.



Figure 2 Longing for physical presence, yet we always arrive and depart at the same time.



Figure 3–9 We live and work within a process. The process is enabled with materiality, context, location, and reflection. Physical and textural layering in design furthers insight and engagement.

Arne Berger, Julia Weller, Miriam Sturdee, David Philip Green, Jesse Josua Benjamin, Alessandro Soro, Mafalda Gamboa, Joseph Lindley



Figures 10 & 11 Meaning-making is a temporary trace upon the environment.



Figure 12 Collaborative sketching as a mode of inquiry and elicitation gives us a multi-modal approach to idea generation. By engaging directly with a continuous stream of others' visual thoughts and conversations we are given snapshots into the designerly mind.

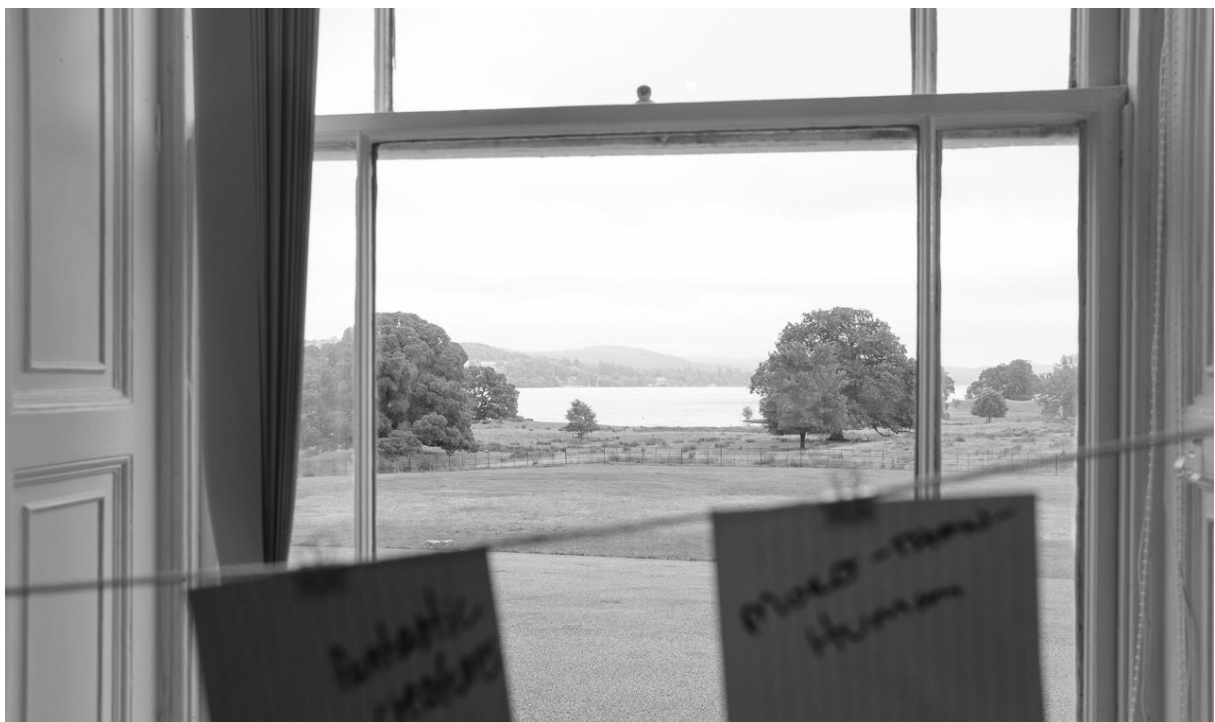


Figure 13 Location and context influence the way in which we approach a task, changing process and temporality. A deep dive into a subject in an unfamiliar location can elicit a response unbound by the constraints of familiarity and interruption.



Figure 14 The natural environment is a source of discovery and reflective potential. A place for quiet dialogue, or personal contemplation. In this particular image, the photographer is able to observe unseen, made possible by the non-uniform surroundings.



Figure 15–19 A story of process, from found object to treasured object, made concrete via interaction and artistry. The delicate, considered nature of the making imbues value into the output.



Figure 20 In Chaos We Excel: Mess-Making as Meaning Making. Dialogue is visualized and physicalized as a series of structures and discrete processes. A physical mind-map is a true meeting of minds, a collision of information that can be interrogated.



Figure 21 There is power in numbers, even with light touches. Trust is a foundation of design research.



Figure 22 Sending a file, the human way. When we imagine data to be a physical medium, like paper, it suggests new ways of working with information.



Figure 23 A study in human-oriented-ontology. The social network as key to research enlightenment.

2. Commentaries

Three comments from attendees and two comments from non-attendees follow. Their authors were prompted with the 23 photographs presented here and asked to deliver short written comments in a format of their choosing.

2.1 Disciplinary aesthetics (from attendee)

For a while, the forms of expressing the work of Research-through-Design (RtD) were sealed up tightly under the pandemic's Zoom regime: aesthetics of the sayable, doable, and visible (Rancière 2006) strictly mediated by compression algorithms, filters, and calendar reminders. Only so much screen space, (co-)hosts, audio signals, and time. The occasional discipline, like the order and pacing of conferences, became all-encompassing. Then, the Jamboree brought a few of us together to become speakers, doers, and seers in the flesh again. Were the forms of expression we found any less disciplined? Weren't we instructed to find ourselves between the call to muck about, log insights, and incessantly reflect? Maybe discipline, whether as an order or way of seeing, is not found but made by people doing what they think they ought to.

The Jamboree's forms of expression became disciplined by how one ought to use materials, one's body or particular vocabularies, yes; but also by navigating the shock of the open world and each other. The mark of the Zoom regime, and the logic of extractive capitalism it encapsulates, will likely never wash off, but it also never touched pure epistemological territory. That is the minor miracle of the Jamboree: We were and are always responsible for RtD's disciplinary aesthetics as they take form through the niches we construct among lab and field, artifact and use, screen and home, nature and workshop, listener and speaker, thought and action.

2.2 Material outcomes and bodily presences (from attendee)

In a role of encouragement and illustration, I experience both being part and on the outside of the gathering. I was often physically present but mentally distant as I considered the events and the people who created them. In this role, I choose what to view through the lens of the pen and paper; I dip in and out depending on whimsy and request. The materiality of the jamboree was a vital part of the documentary, and my threads are interwoven with the contributions of others. A solo material outcome was a series of 'postcards from the jamboree', which cast a subjective perspective on the events and items of interest: a person, seated, a landscape, or a made object. As a collaborator, I illustrated a book, a concept, a dragon, ...

In one photograph, I am present but appear disconnected and disengaged with the moment, which is a good allegory for the role, in which I orbit the jamboree sun and appear once every few minutes like a comet. Distinct from the loose structure of the event was also the continuation of conversations and their divergence from design research into the personalities and lives of those attending. I wonder if these conversations are as much a part of the

work we aim to undertake as the things we plan in careful detail and contemplation? I discovered a long-lost university friend was the colleague and best friend of the facilitator's daughter – you can't predict or plan for these moments of serendipity. The journey we take when we are together 'after hours' could be woven into research practice, though formalizing the process might lose the magic we experienced in that protected space.

2.3 Selective commentary (from non-attendee)

design peeking in images lost in the woods. A glimpse inside the bodies of others. I see the fear of missing out: I invited all my family, an event is an overwhelming investment. As I squint to recognise pollination of ideas, I appreciate these rituals. design is being there, signs of designerly values, a more diverse crowd. Is this a gathering of the truly unfamiliar? In the aesthetic balance between what is in focus and out of focus. There is childhood, community, the holding of hands, and the silent gathering the design focus to those on the margins a fragment of research that can be evidence of a world I am a part of. The bodies of others, encapsulating the echo of a distant insight. Exactly as it should be.

2.4 (A) Play (from non-attendee)

Overture

The curtain opens on a view of an outdoor space, no people are present, but their trace is visible through abandoned coffee cups. Stones are stacked on a table (a wish for good fortune, or just killing some time?). Inside, we can see people through the glass windows, and in reflection more people, trees, and what looks like an old building with rock walls. The black and white makes the image timeless and nostalgic.

Act 1: May the show begin

The collage of pictures shows the productive messiness of the day. People talk, discuss, create, sort out, break, and put together again, and in the process, the space is remade in the image of a very distinctive place, all too familiar to design researchers. Sketches, drawings,

all manner of objects, and notes, so many sticky notes, are attached to all possible surfaces for everyone to see, and when surfaces run out, to strings. There is also a glimpse of the outside world, indirectly through a mirror, or as pictures from a short walk outdoors. It feels cleaner, quieter, and slower out there. Inside, the spirit feels performative, people sit orderly on the floor. They may just as well be having breakfast at Hogwarts. Certainly, to some observers, they would feel engaged in some form of witchcraft and wizardry.

Act 2: Escape

The contrasts between indoors and outdoors, messiness and calmness, group activity, and solitary exploration are almost too obvious to point out. If the indoor activities are performative, outdoor time is contemplative and self-paced. A view of a lake in the background is emblematic of this relation. The stillness of the lake is emphasized by the haze and lack of color and made almost dreamy by the framing in between the trees and the window frame. The notes on a string, in the foreground, but off focus, look like a blindfold coming off the photographer's eyes. Outdoors, the performers walk alone or gather in smaller groups, get close to the materials of their design explorations, and overall appear to step out of their professional identities. If the scenes indoors are idiosyncratic of the design studio, the ones outdoors may well depict botanists, entomologists, or treasure hunters.

Act 3: Balance

The visuals return indoors, where artifacts and knowledge are again systematized, only to bounce outdoors again. As viewers, we don't get to know the meaning of the performance, other than guessing from how the participants balance the branch on their fingers that everyone's contribution matters. Similarly, and directly rhyming, we see hands carrying what looks like an oversized poster, made of a collage of pictures, notes, and sketches. Again, we are not made to know the outcomes of these works, and why they mattered to the participants. In the next scene, it all comes to a conclusion (maybe just too soon?). The notes that used to occupy each available surface are all gone. We are left to read in the people's expressions whether the experience stood up to the expectations.

2.5 Record of context and environment (from attendee)

One afternoon during the Jamboree, as part of an activity so loosely defined as to be effective "permission to muck about", seven of us were assembled by the shore of the lake; two by the water's edge, tethering a sculpture made of wool and driftwood to the low-hanging branch of a tree, such that it would float on the surface of the water. At one point, someone began to gently tap stones together in a simple rhythm. Two others joined in, and the unprompted performance lasted several minutes. Afterward, there was some laughter, and tentative joy in our spontaneous co-creation; an improvisation, with improvised instruments, improvised roles, and no objectives. Like other moments captured here, this moment, and its resonance in me and in the others present that afternoon, are a function of context. I find it hard to imagine anything like this happening on a conference call, and

words feel almost as inadequate as images to describe it. But understood in context, it begins to make sense. Otherwise, its recipe is a tacit secret, like Barthes' punctum; a paradox of quantum observation - impossible to convey.

The spirits of improvisation, creative freedom, and experimentation are not unique to the Jamboree, but simple shifts nurtured them: From the campus to the countryside; from the great indoors to the great outdoors; from online to offline interactions - face-to-face for the first time in ages; from S.M.A.R.T. objectives to 'mucking about'. This photographic record captures a Jamboree, perhaps one of multiple.

For my part, it was a privilege to spend a week untethered to normal life, to join in fellowship with others, and to experience the elements, and the Cumbrian weather. But what remains are questions: Can we untether the Jamboree? Is its recipe legible in the photographs?

3. Conclusion

We presented 23 black-and-white photographs and layers of comments, documenting and reflecting a week-long gathering of design researchers discussing and advancing design research as a discipline. As one of our anonymous reviewers wrote: *"Championing messiness, social connections, and being-in the moment is a great cause and a necessary one."* Being extraordinarily confident with messiness, chaos, and tensions, design research is maturing into a discipline capable of tackling wicked problems on every scale. To nurture this ongoing transformative shift, there is a need for design researchers to gather beyond labs, classrooms, and conferences. Who is organizing the next "What else could you call it?"

4. References

- Bleviss, E., Hauser, S., Odom, W. (2015). Sharing the hidden treasure in pictorials. *Interactions* 22, 3: 32–43. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2755534>
- Gamboa, M. (2022). Conversations with Myself: Sketching Workshop Experiences in Design Epistemology. In *Creativity and Cognition*, 71–82. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3527927.3531450>
- Rancière, J. (2006). *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London; New York: Continuum.

About the Authors:

Alessandro Soro is an associate professor in the School of Computer Science, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. His research interests include collaborative and participatory design of emerging technologies, often in cooperation with underserved and marginalized users.

Julia Weller is an artist.

David Philip Green is a design researcher and documentary maker based at the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. He is currently using creative, design, and documentary-led methods to inform the development of new digital research infrastructure to support environmental science across areas including biodiversity, pollution, and hydro-climate risks.

Mafalda Samuelsson-Gamboa is a PhD student at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden. She is an avid advocate of first-person perspectives as an essential component of design research and has written a number of autoethnographies. With a background in architecture, she has a strong interest in concept-driven visual methods, including sketching and photography.

Miriam Sturdee is a lecturer at the University of St Andrews School of Computer Science. She explores the relationships between art and HCI, and gamified resources for UX design. Her first book 'Sketching in HCI' (in collaboration with Makayla Lewis) will be released in Autumn 2024.

Jesse Josua Benjamin is a post-doctoral research associate at Lancaster University with the "Fixing the Future" project. His research combines Research-through-Design and philosophy of technology to probe the experiential and aesthetic implications of novel technologies on how people make and see their world(s).

Joseph Lindley is a Senior Research Fellow at Lancaster University's School of Design. He leads Design Research Works, a project that captures and communicates the value of design-led research and occasionally hosts Jamborees. <https://designresearch.works>

Arne Berger is a Full Professor of Human-Computer Interaction at Anhalt University of Applied Sciences (the second home of the Bauhaus). He recently finished a sabbatical trying to figure out how to take photographs of what more-than-human researchers consider more-than-human.