

Life-Centred Design: Compassion in Action

Thinking, Learning, Doing: Plural Ways of Design

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Abstract

Compassion is fundamental to human and planetary survival, continuity and flourishing. Advances in psychology and neuroscience have significantly increased our understanding of compassion as a core human trait with substrates of cooperation, caregiving, altruism, morality and inclusion. Neuroimaging studies investigating physiological characteristics and chemical activity of the brain reveal that neural-correlates of compassion-based thinking and behaviours are specific, traceable and distinct from lab-controlled cruelty trait expression. In simple terms, the brain is wired for compassion and cruelty. This evidence coupled with the growing global worldview of compassion as a core value, attitude and motive in designing for change, inclusion, security, accessibility and dignity, directly calls designers to incorporate compassionate thinking and behaviours in their design endeavours.

This in turn, inherently necessitates designers to reach beyond a human-centred approach to a life-centred design approach whereby consideration of the needs, wellbeing, pain-points and systemic place and belonging of all life forms and the planet's welfare and sustainability are all core considerations of the design process. In this exploratory paper, we treat compassion as the foundation for life-centred design approaches in which diverse perspectives, futures imagination and anticipatory betterment are central to the inclusive design paradigm. We draw on evidence-based neuroscience and psychology underpinning emotive, cognitive and behavioural correlates of compassion, and the human capacity for development and deliberate activation of compassion-based traits in the professional practice of designers. We conclude with a discussion on what this approach could mean and entail for designers, design thinking and design research.

Keywords

INCLUSIVE DESIGN

NEUROSCIENCE OF COMPASSION

LIFE CENTRED DESIGN

SPHERICAL ECOLOGY

What is Life-Centred Design?

Life-centred Design is a design philosophy and approach that goes beyond human needs and puts all life at the centre of our creations.

Life-centred Design advocates for biological ecosystems and non-user communities that have never had a voice in the design process. The long-term goal is to restore natural ecosystems by creating new relationships between nature and society.

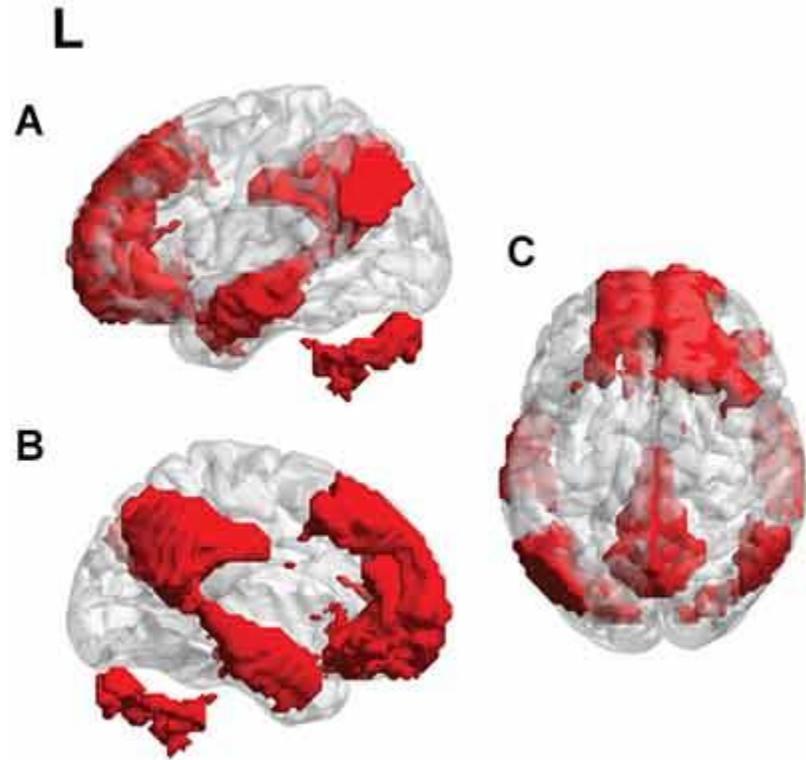
Jeroen Spoelstra (2022)

What is Compassion?

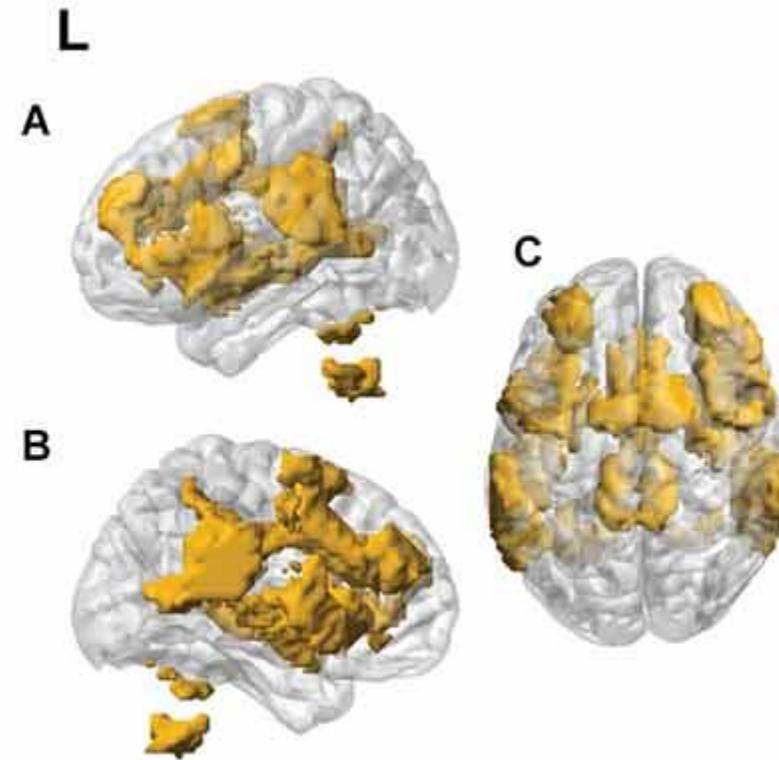
- An adaptive response to understanding and responding to the needs of others
- Pro-social behaviour that enhances survival, continuity and well-being
- Requires:
 - Sensitivity to the suffering of the other
 - Desire to alleviate the suffering

The Brain that Cares for Others

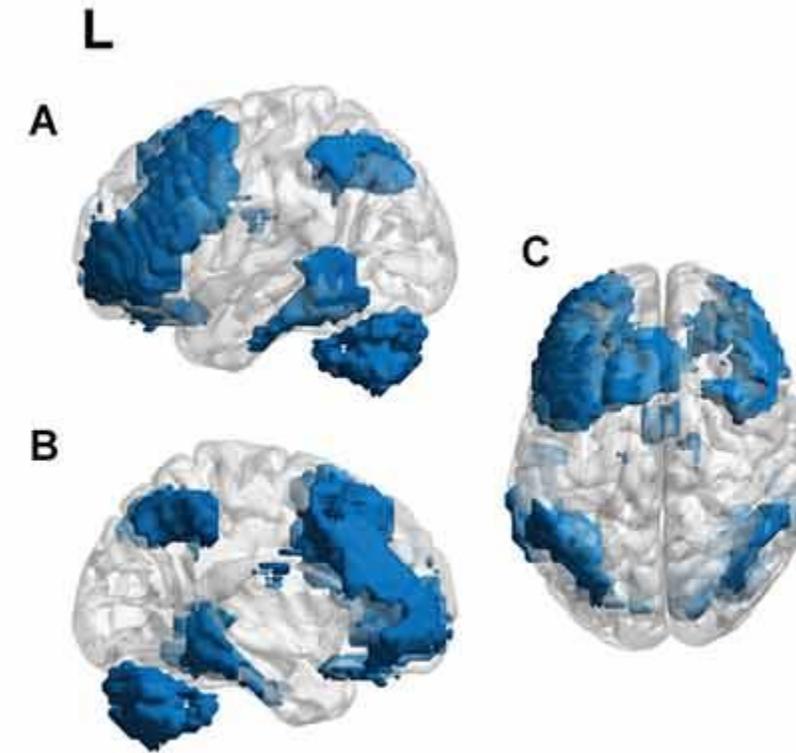
Default mode network



Saliience network



Frontoparietal network



View: A - lateral, B - sagittal, C - superior; L - left

Holistic Compassion

Beyond users' sense of dignity, empowerment, inclusion, and security:

"When we design for humanity, we cannot stop with people. We must consider the entire globe: all living things, the quality of the land, water, and air." – Don Norman

Wicked Problems and Compassion-led Design

Values-based

Wider impact on society and planet

Sustainability integrated in person-centred considerations

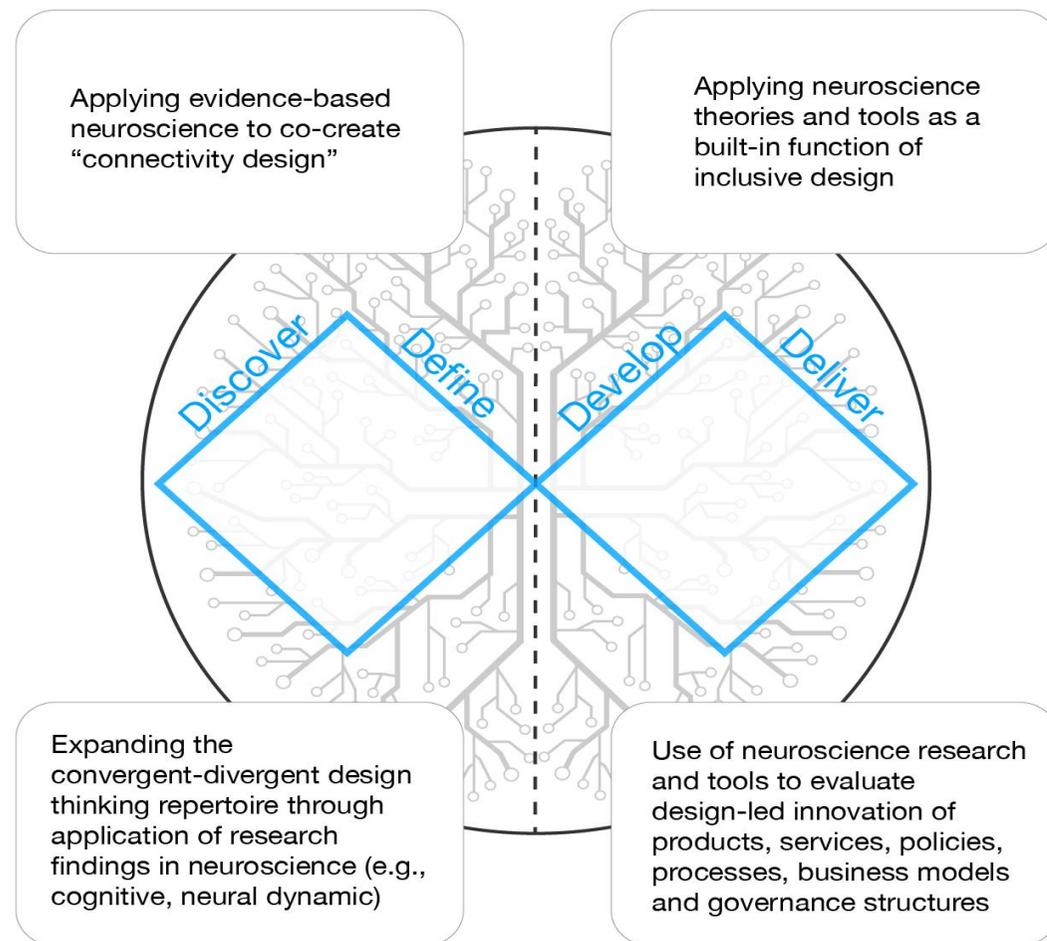
Systemic impact and future scenarios

Understanding impact of waste generation

Waste as finite with potential for reuse to meet future human and planetary needs

Multi-scale innovations approach

Design Meets Neuroscience: a design sans frontières proposition





अनस्थिरता

impermanence عدم استحكام

Interdependence - Interconnectedness

His holiness, The Dalai Lama says, “True **compassion** is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate attitude towards others does not change even if they behave negatively.” **Inter-dependence**, of course, is a fundamental law of nature. Not only higher forms of life but also many of the smallest insects are social beings who, without any religion, law or education, survive by mutual cooperation based on an innate recognition of their interconnectedness

Self preservation to protection - a carnal need to save the rest for survival of self



निर्दयता

cruelty

ظلم

Life - centred Design: Compassion in Action | Flory and Agrawal, 2025

Photographer: Ashraf Amra/APA Images /Zuma/Eyevine

Yamuna Grieves

the after life of a river and HER
community as she nestles and
crumbles through its **52** kilometre
stretch of the National Capital Territory



Veena - Lack Lustre

decolonising a traditional
instrument - a classical
conservatism, through its
contemporary adaptation into
Carnatic Jazz



Kathakali

gender discord and inequality - an astute conditioning to discard grace, submissiveness and hostility and embrace aggression and heroism





वात्सल्य

compassion پیار

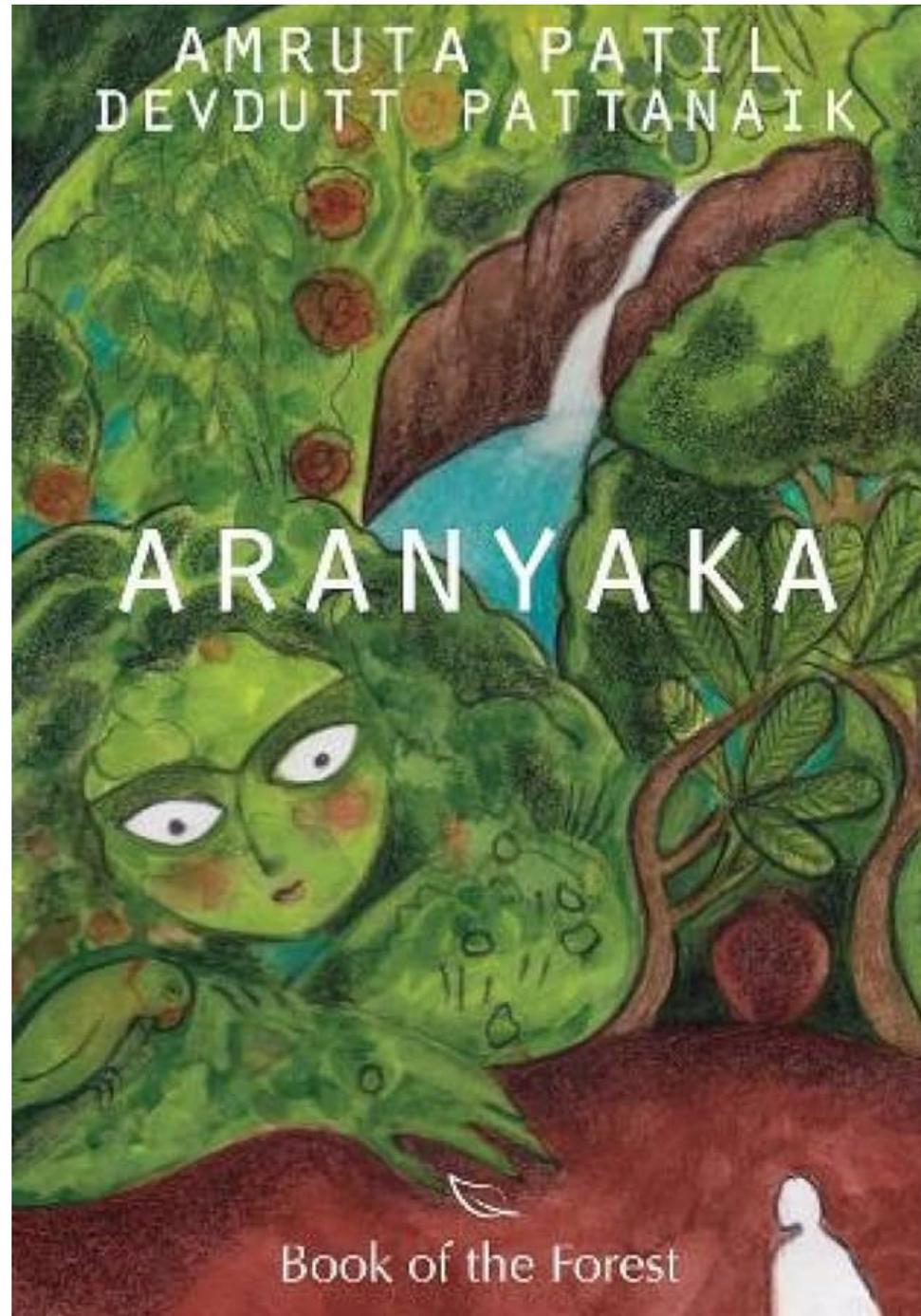
Indigo Beyond a Dye

the community built as Ganga
Maki at the foothills of Himalayas -
Japanese textile designer Chiaki
Maki preserves natural ways of
rearing rare silk and cultivating
chemical free indigo



Not Human Narratives

Indian graphic novel Author and
Illustrator - Amruta Patil and her
tryst with untold India -
addressing the untamed wonders
of nature and its self preservation
through a philosophical lens



Pashmina - A Recital

Taleem - an heirloom, a secret passage of codes of weaving through generations by a medium of language, colour and symbols





other-centeredness
universal altruism

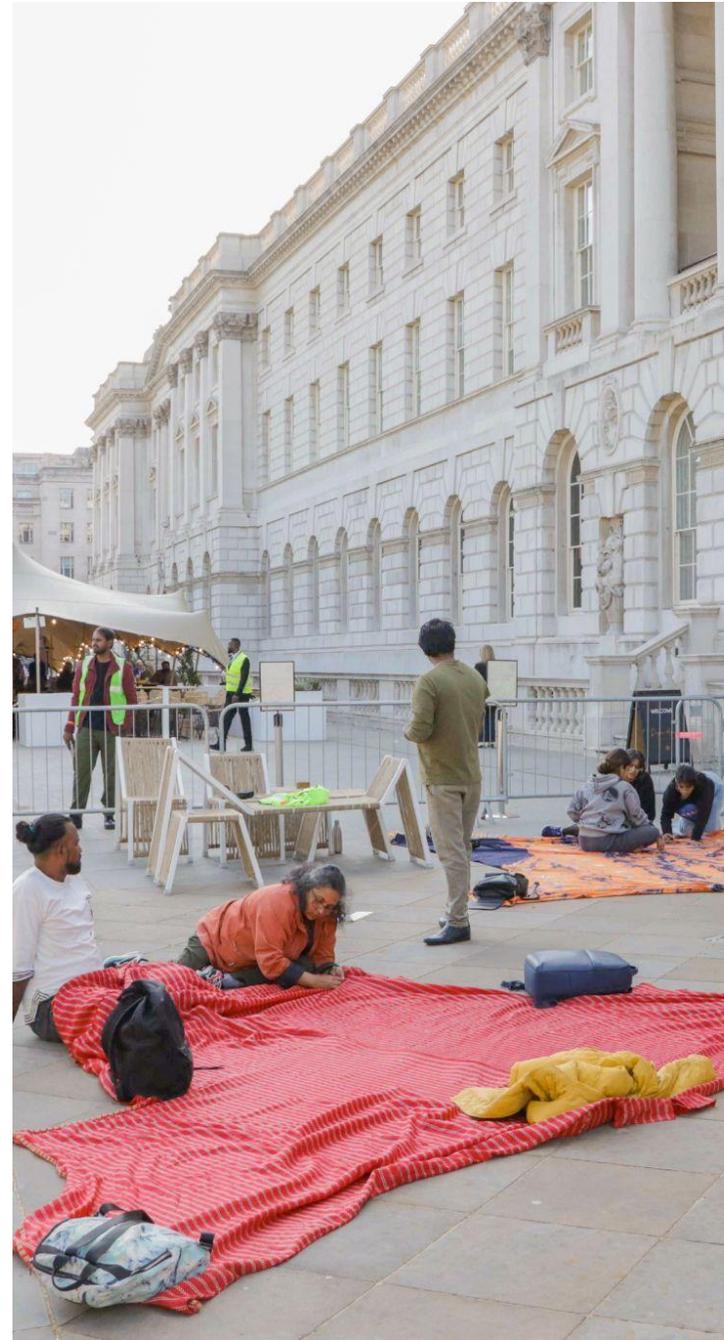
Spherical Ecology

In a classic social model, The 3 axes exist as **Economy**, **Time** and **People**, making the circle of 3 coordinates concurrent. Imagine the axis of people to rotate as an A axis labelled **“Compassion”** and the Economy as **“Interdependence”**, what comes alive is a sphere of an ecology - a mutual existence in pluralistic polarities - where more than circular ways of the existence could be plausible.



Chowk and Charpai

The true cacophony of **Indian streets**, a social fabric we call “chowk” - a meeting place, **the urban living room** of India that is today. Chowk is where design is imagined as a collaborative of multiple hearts, souls that sync in unison and hands that create stories that remain unaltered with the passage of time.



From Waste to Wonder

The Design Village (TDV) partnered with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in India to upcycle **old merchandise** into meaningful new creations. H.E. Ms. Marisa Gerards, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to India, introduced the upcycled merchandise and expressed her commitment to solving **societal challenges** through **design**.



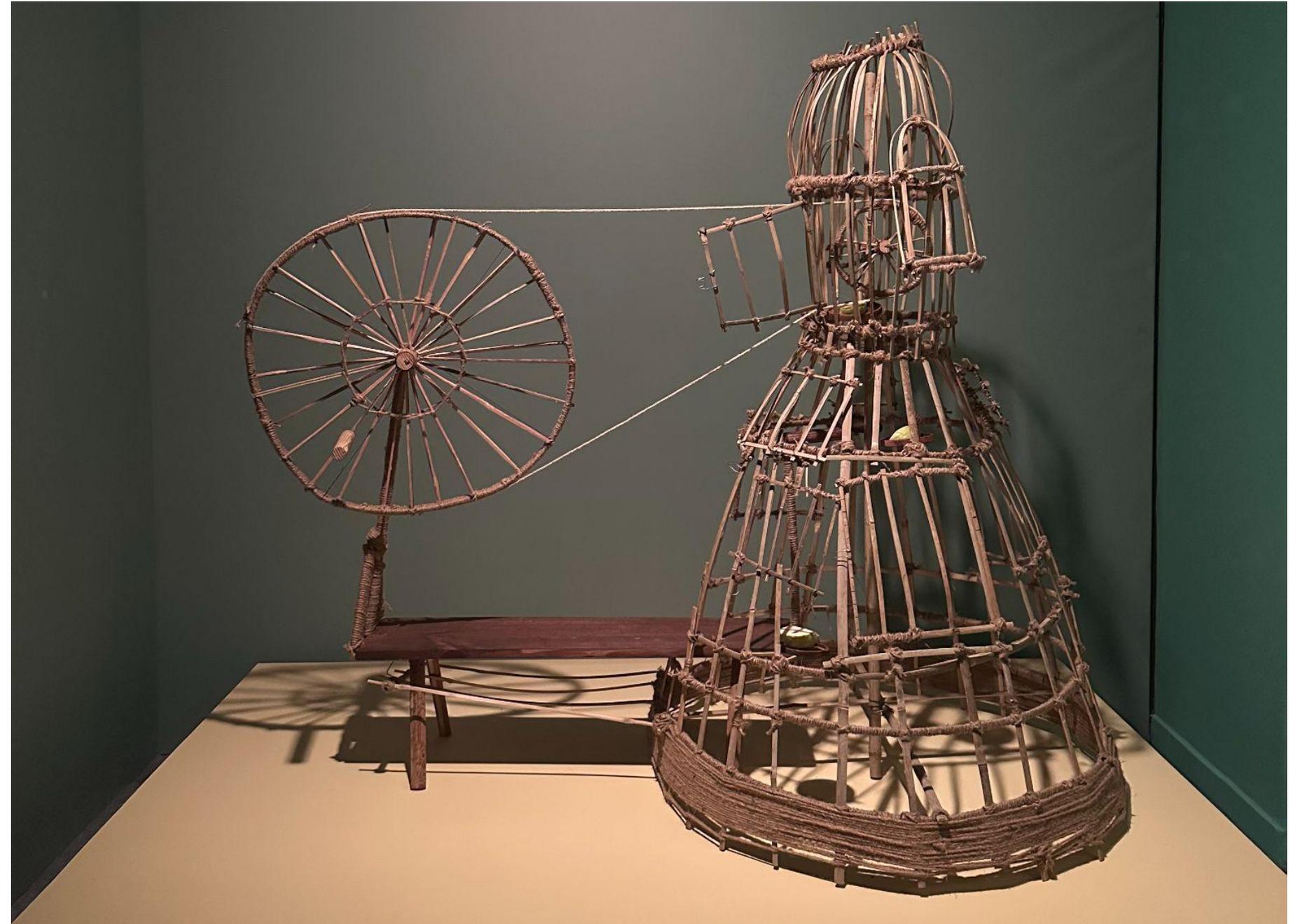
Embassy of the
Kingdom of the Netherlands



Oggetti tra le Righe

Produced by the Italian Cultural Institute in New Delhi, "**Objects Between the Lines**" celebrates the interplay between two creative disciplines—literature and design—from Italy and India.

curated by: Dr Andrea Anastasio,
Domitilla Dardi

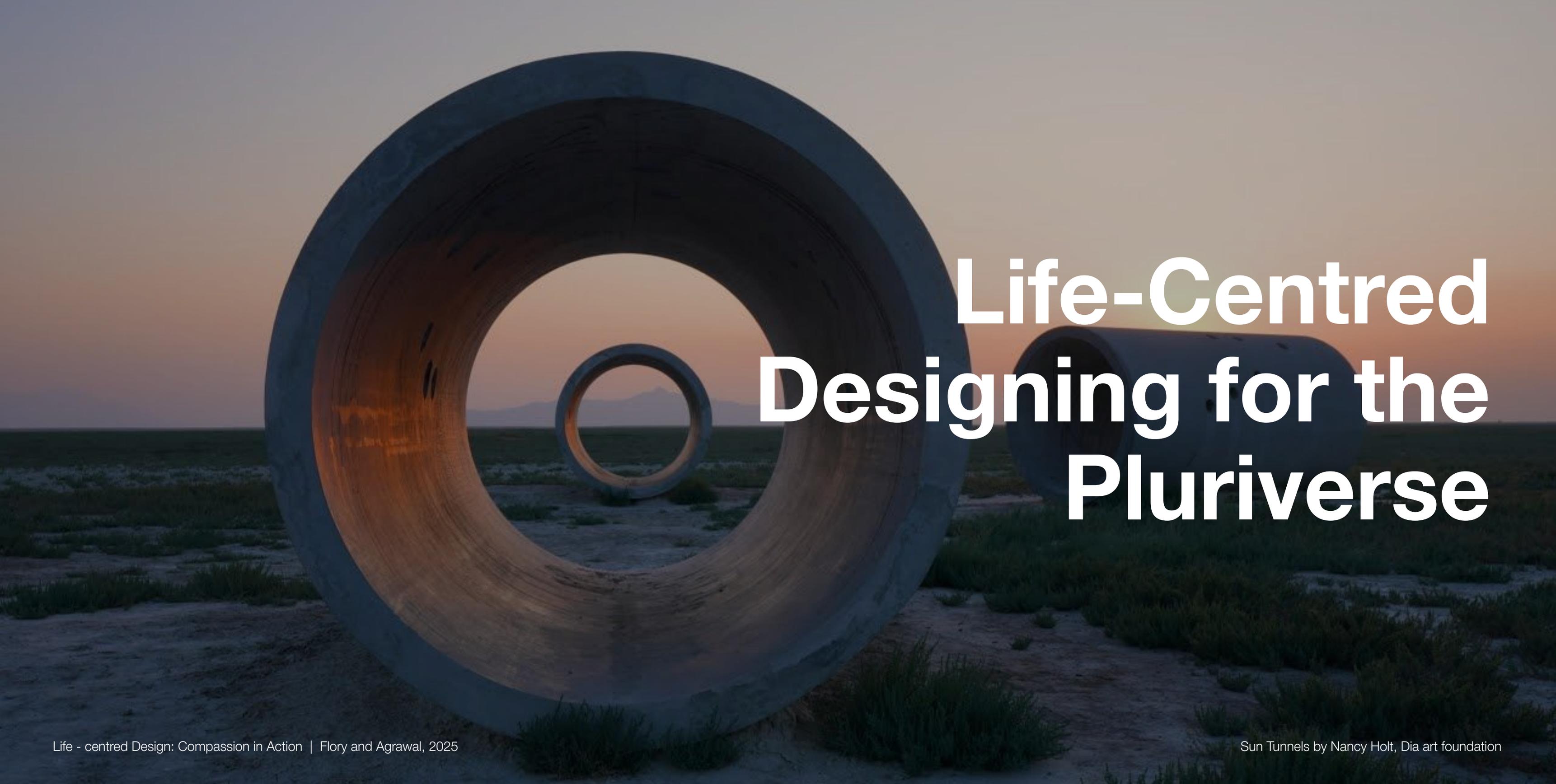


Preserving a/vocation

A revival of **old textiles** into merchandise that can transcend passage of time and live on in a **second life**. Imagined by the students of TDV and **underprivileged** women supported by Savera Welfare Trust.

Dr Melanie Flory conducted a masterclass, sensitising them through **“Cognitive Reframing Mediated by Fabric Related Sensory Input”**



The image shows three large, circular concrete tunnels arranged in a line on a sandy, grassy plain at sunset. The sun is visible through the middle tunnel, creating a bright glow. The text 'Life-Centred Designing for the Pluriverse' is overlaid in white on the right side of the image.

Life-Centred Designing for the Pluriverse