Designing from Handiness: Cultivating collective design capabilities in Quito, Ecuador

Luis Garcia [1]

Abstract: This paper explores 'designing from handiness' an evolving framework rooted in critical consciousness and local knowledge, developed through a collaborative process with the *Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial* (SHOT) in Quito, Ecuador, under the Transition Design umbrella. The paper presents two evolving components of the designing from handiness framework: sensing handiness –immersing in a context to document and engage with its artifacts and sociocultural dynamics– and expanding collective handiness, which emphasizes leveraging practical and lived knowledge.

Through participatory workshops, the project engaged public servants to cultivate design capabilities while reflecting on the purpose of their work and amplifying their existing expertise. Challenges such as limited resources, technology, and time constraints highlighted the need for an adaptable approach that respects and builds upon local conditions. The paper presents two central discussions: bridging handiness with the Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir*, which emphasizes sustainable and collective approaches, and navigating constrained infrastructures to uncover and expand existing practices within communities. By reframing design as a situated, collective process, this work critiques dominant design approaches and proposes a pathway for empowering communities to foster sustainable and equitable transitions. While this paper represents an initial exploration, it lays the groundwork for future research on handiness across diverse settings and invites collaboration to develop this evolving framework further.

Keywords: Designing from handiness - Critical consciousness - Transition design - Design capabilities - Participatory workshops - Handiness

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Introduction

Transition design is an emerging field focusing on systems change and transitions to address systemic societal challenges. It aims to rethink and redesign how we live and interact among humans and more-than-human, emphasizing interactions across social, economic, technical, and ecological systems (Irwin *et al.*, 2015). By transforming these interactions, transition design seeks to catalyze more sustainable ways of living.

The complex and interconnected nature of societal challenges requires responses that engage holistically with social and environmental domains. These responses must be creative and integrative, intentionally blurring traditional dichotomies and crossing disciplinary boundaries (Juri *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, they must reflect a commitment to addressing these issues through non-colonialist perspectives, ensuring that interventions respect and build upon the specific dynamics of each context. This paper delves into a practical exploration, presenting a case study that examines the tensions and opportunities that emerge when working with the *Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial* (SHOT) in Quito, Ecuador. It presents the design of a series of workshops to cultivate design capabilities for public servants under the Transition Design umbrella. The paper focuses on how the process focuses on developing critical consciousness (Freire, 2020)[1] of the existing knowledge and skills in the organization instead of imposing a set of tools and content. In the context of Ecuador, this approach resonates with the principles of *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua), which advocates for harmonious and sustainable relationships among humans and with nature. *Buen Vivir* offers a valuable framework for aligning design practices with local cultural paradigms, emphasizing the importance of equity, balance, and respect for socio-ecological systems. Consequently, this paper contributes to Transition Design, which, as a relatively new field, provides fertile ground for exploring its application in practice (Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017; van Selm and Mulder, 2019). Finally, through this

case study, I present the notion of 'designing from handiness,' an approach I am developing as part of my doctoral research in Transition Design.

This paper is structured as follows: first, I discuss my positionality, disclosing my relation to the past, how it has affected my actions in the present, and then my stance on the future. Then, I discuss 'handiness' and how I bridge it with 'design' a current exploration part of my doctoral studies. Finally, I present the case study with SHOT, where I start presenting components of the 'designing from handiness' approach. The paper ends with a conclusion and next steps, inviting others to collaborate around these ideas.

Positionality

I am an Ecuadorian designer, born and raised in Cuenca, the third-largest city in this small South American country. Growing up in a lower-middle-class family exposed me to significant struggles and offered a close look at the inequalities that define much of our nation. These experiences instilled an acute awareness of the systems that shape our realities and the privileges I did not have. When I was 23, through a combination of effort and luck, I moved to the USA—a transition that brought new challenges and made me even more conscious of my identity. In navigating a diverse yet unequal society, I became more mindful of the color of my skin, my accent, my age, my educational background, my worldviews, and much more. These aspects of my identity, shaped by both my struggles and opportunities, influence how I engage with others and, inevitably, how I design.

Designers don't always question their role in reinforcing the disadvantages and inequalities in our society. Through my work, I attempt to do so and contribute with a grain of sand to a broader body of knowledge that strives to rethink and remake what designing is. I do so acknowledging that I bring specific biases and perspectives that may not always resonate with whoever is reading this work. Some of these biases and perspectives come from disappointments with the field, and others from a profound belief that design and designers have a more transformative role in addressing contemporary issues.

As a designer, I was fortunate to gain early exposure to the broader societal contributions of the field. Over time, my understanding of design has evolved through a transformative journey. I was once captivated by the possibilities of participatory design, mistakenly believing that designers, as facilitators, could act as neutral agents in collaborative processes. However, through my experiences as a designer and facilitator, I realized that true neutrality is unattainable. Instead, appropriate design solutions require a deep immersion in the unique contexts and nuances of the places and people involved. Designers are responsible for engaging thoughtfully and empowering others to define their own processes, envision their futures, and build on their existing knowledge and skills.

Finally, engaging in this work requires me to navigate the complexities of inhabiting two distinct places—both physically and metaphorically. I move between the Global North (USA) and the Global South (Ecuador), each shaping my perspective in unique ways. This duality profoundly influences how I approach my work, as I carry the perspectives, strug-

gles, and insights from both contexts. It creates a tension—a constant negotiation—between two worlds that are culturally, socially, and economically different.

These contrasting realities influence not only how I approach my work but also how I understand my role within it. The intersections of these two places force me to confront the reality of sometimes being an outsider in my own country while simultaneously providing opportunities to contribute to it through a deeper sensitivity to and familiarity with the Global South's socio-cultural, environmental, and economic realities.

With this understanding, I take a clear stance in researching and practicing design in ways that benefit those who need it most—those seeking to break free from oppressive structures that limit their futures. I am committed to a design approach that resists the domestication of the future and prioritizes the perspectives of those in the Global South. This means working from within these contexts to challenge dominant practices that often ignore or erase existing knowledge and traditions. Instead, I aim to amplify local practices, knowledge systems, and imaginations, fostering pathways for empowerment and self-determination rooted in the realities and aspirations of those I work with.

Understanding 'Handiness' in the Philosophy of Álvaro Vieira Pinto

The concept of 'handiness,' as developed by Brazilian philosopher Álvaro Vieira Pinto, offers a profound lens through which to examine the relationship between human consciousness and reality. Rooted in a dialectical framework, handiness (*amanualidade*)[2] emphasizes how individuals produce and transform their existence through interaction with the objects and artifacts surrounding them.

At its core, handiness is an ontological concept that ties human consciousness to the material world. It describes the active engagement with objects that are 'ready-to-hand'—tools and artifacts that mediate and shape how humans interact with their environment. Heidegger (1977) formulated handiness to explain the process of unveiling the world in everyday life. The primary mode of being-in-the-world is practical (Zuhandenheit): a person acts with the artifacts available, without experiencing a subject-object distinction. The reflective mode of handiness (Vorhandenheit) only appears when the artifact breaks down, becomes difficult to operate, or becomes a theoretical challenge (van Amstel, *et al.,* 2024). Vieira Pinto extends Heidegger's existentialist philosophy by integrating a Marxist historical perspective, emphasizing that artifacts are not static but evolve through labor and social processes (R. F. Gonzatto *et al.,* 2013; R. F. Gonzatto and Merkle, 2016). Before an artifact could be put into society, one would need to produce it through organized activity, i.e., work. Hence, shifting from the practical to the theoretical mode of handiness is not enough to overcome the peril of modern technology, as Heidegger suggested. Saving humanity from humanity requires changing the overall conditions for workers (van Amstel, *et al.,* 2024). This call to change the conditions of workers inspired me to reflect on the conditions from which we design. By designing from within (handiness), we can interrogate and rethink the *within* itself—our tools, practices, and environments. Handiness prompts us to consider a more grounded and appropriate approach to design that pays

close attention to the entangled conditions shaping both the designer and the designed, fostering deeper, more intentional ways of creating.

According to Vieira Pinto, human beings produce themselves through their engagement with the world. This engagement is not merely about utility; it involves a transformative process where both the object and the subject are redefined. For instance, a simple piece of clay can transition from raw material to a functional vessel to an object of aesthetic appreciation, depending on the degree of handiness invested in it. Each transformation reflects an elevation in the mode of being, demonstrating the inherent interconnection between human development and the artifacts they create[3].

Handiness: Work and Design

Vieira Pinto posits that humans come to know the world through the entities—objects, and artifacts—present in their immediate environment. These entities are not static; they are products of historical processes and accumulated human labor (R. Gonzatto and Merkle, 2016; Vieira Pinto, 1960). The notion of circumstance is crucial here, as it underscores the inseparability of individuals from their socio-historical context. To understand a person, one must also understand their surroundings—not as mere backdrops but as integral components of their being. Work plays a central role in this dynamic. Drawing from Marxist thought, Vieira Pinto views work as the transformative activity through which humans modify external reality and, in the process, shape themselves. This concept of work extends beyond mere employment; it encompasses any activity that alters the material world, for example, how we deal with a piece of clay, but also how we design interactions or systems (a participatory workshop, a policy, etc.). Through work, humans create new conditions of existence, developing new artifacts and systems and, consequently, new ways of relating to the world.

I draw a parallel between handiness and design, recognizing design as a form of work. From an ontological design perspective—a theory that asserts design designs—I connect Vieira Pinto's third mode of handiness with the transformative nature of design. When we design (transform the world), the world (now transformed) transforms (designs) how we inhabit it (Fry, 2013; Willis, 2006). Consequently, our way of being in the world changes, meaning we transform ourselves as part of the world's transformation.

Alvaro Vieira Pinto, however, advances this discussion by introducing a critical dimension that adds depth to the perspectives of Heidegger, Willis, or Fry's frameworks. He emphasizes that worldmaking must be understood through the lens of work, labor, and exploitation—key factors that shape human existence but are overlooked in ontological design's traditional formulations. His third mode of handiness critiques dualistic views (e.g., nature vs. culture) and instead presents a dialectical relationship where culture and nature coexist and influence one another. Crucially, he situates artifacts as cultural mediators, evolving through labor and social processes, and highlights how design's role in worldmaking must grapple with oppression, underdevelopment, and the broader conditions of existence shaped by exploitation. By integrating these considerations, Vieira Pinto expands

ontological design discourse, offering a perspective that foregrounds the realities of labor and its role in shaping human and material worlds.

The concept of 'handiness' offers a powerful lens for rethinking design practices, particularly in contexts where dominant approaches often overlook local realities. My choice to explore handiness stems from a critique of design processes that parachute into places, assuming that these locations are inherently underdeveloped and in need of transition. Such approaches often embody colonial and capitalist mindsets, treating humans and their material conditions separate from the natural world. This practice not only denies people's capacity to cultivate their existing knowledge and skills but also imposes external solutions that fail to engage meaningfully with the realities of the place.

Central to my argument is the problematic tendency in design to tackle 'wicked problems' without fully understanding their complexity. Wicked problems, as conceptualized by Rittel and Webber (1973), are inherently ill-defined, with no concrete solutions, stopping points, or universal criteria for success. Yet, designers often rush to solve wicked problems using tools and frameworks that reduce wickedness to manageable tasks, frequently overlooking their own roles in shaping history and perpetuating systemic issues. While such approaches may appear collaborative, they risk reinforcing hierarchical dynamics by framing designers as problem-solvers and communities as passive recipients of solutions. In contrast, handiness encourages design from within—a practice that recognizes and amplifies the capabilities and knowledge already present in a given context. Rather than imposing external frameworks, it emphasizes co-creating new conditions of existence through a deep engagement with local realities. This perspective on handiness aligns with the work of Scupelli (2002), who examines how affordances operate at a community of practice level, deepening our understanding of a context to design strategies that foster collaboration and collective action.

Handiness aligns with transition design by emphasizing the need for a shift in mindset and posture, both for individuals and collectives, to foster sustainable transitions. Transition design argues that transitional times require self-reflection and a reorientation of our internal worldview, which influences how we engage externally with others and solve problems (Irwin, 2015). Similarly, handiness foregrounds the importance of engaging with local realities and material conditions, offering a way to design from within rather than imposing external frameworks.

Transition design critiques how designers' mindsets often go unnoticed, even though they profoundly shape the framing and solving of problems. Handiness complements this critique by advocating for a design approach that acknowledges and amplifies existing knowledge and practices within a given context. It emphasizes cultivating relational and context-sensitive practices that align with the principles of a holistic worldview and collaborative engagement central to transition design.

Moreover, handiness resonates with the transition design argument that the current global crises stem from an outdated worldview that fails to address interconnected challenges. Handiness offers a pathway for designers to engage deeply with the interior, invisible dimensions of human experience, as suggested by du Plessis (2014). By integrating local knowledge and cultivating individual and collective transformation, handiness supports the redefinition of design practices to align with transition design's call for more collabo-

rative, reflective, and responsible approaches. This integration enables designers to work not only on external systems but also on the mindsets and worldviews necessary to drive meaningful, place-based transitions.

In what follows, I present my work with the *Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial* (SHOT) in Quito, Ecuador, while discussing the concept of handiness across the different stages of collaborating with SHOT.

Designing with the *Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial* (SHOT)

Designing with the Secretaria de Habitat and Ordenamiento Territorial (SHOT) involved a collaborative exploration of key themes related to Transition Design and how they could forward their work. SHOT is responsible for the territorial strategies and regulation of public spaces in Quito, Ecuador, by creating policies and rules for land planning and management, territorial management, historic areas, heritage real estate, and urban development. SHOT works in a coordinated manner with related municipal entities and other levels of government to guarantee sustainable territorial development and quality of life in the Metropolitan District of Quito (Alcaldia Metropolitana de Quito, 2024).

This process was structured around four interrelated activities: curriculum design for participatory workshops, facilitation of seven participatory workshops, semi-structured interviews, and surveys with SHOT participants. These activities played a distinct role in fostering a space for collective learning, dialogue, and reflection. The following sections detail these activities, describing their design, implementation, and contributions to developing the 'designing from handiness' approach.

Understanding the Degrees of Handiness and the 'Zero Degree' at SHOT

In January 2024, I connected to Juan Fernando Vasconez (JF) and Pamela Sanchez (PS) from the *Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial* (SHOT). JF and PS were intrigued by the possibilities design methods could offer in their work, which led us to explore commonalities between their interests and my research. I was initially asked to present a proposal of potential collaboration paths and to describe specific methods they could integrate into their operations. I created several concept note documents (Punch, 2016) to outline the objectives, methodology, expected results, and budget for a partnership between SHOT and me. I repeated this process several times and presented my ideas on bridging their work with my research to their team, particularly managers in the organization. Moreover, I showed examples of similar organizations integrating design into their work and its potential benefits and limitations.

From the beginning, the process was challenging to navigate. On the one hand, SHOT was unfamiliar with design, and their understanding seemed more connected to specific de-

sign practices such as graphic design or urban planning. On the other hand, I was trying to rapidly understand the organization's dynamics and build a relationship with this group. I embraced the discomfort of operating in such an ambiguous environment, which eventually ended in approval from the organization to facilitate seven participatory sessions with ten public servants from different areas. The agreement was that the participatory session would focus on helping public servants learn about transition design, strategic design methods (affinity diagramming, prototyping methods, and others), and broader aspects of collaborating amongst each other and civil society.

Throughout this process, I emphasized that I was not an 'expert' but rather a potential collaborator as I acknowledged my limited understanding of their work, challenges, and everyday dynamics. Instead of coming in with an 'expert' lens, I initiated my engagement by recognizing that they already possess sophisticated techniques and deep interactions with their surrounding contexts. These existing knowledge and skills can have varying degrees of sophistication and depth, which Vieira Pinto refers to as 'handiness degrees.'

Handiness is not a uniform experience; it varies in degrees based on the level of development and accumulated labor embodied in the artifacts and techniques of a society. Vieira Pinto introduces the idea of the 'degree of handiness' to describe this variability. At any given historical moment, each society possesses a certain degree of handiness that reflects the sophistication of its techniques and the depth of its interaction with reality. The 'zero degree' of handiness is particularly noteworthy. Rather than signifying an absence of skill or knowledge, the zero degree represents the foundational level from which development proceeds (R. Gonzatto and Merkle, 2016). For example, Vieira Pinto reinterprets illiteracy not as a lack but as a degree of literacy. Illiterate individuals are not devoid of knowledge; they engage with the world and possess a wealth of practical understanding necessary for survival. Recognizing this reframes educational and technical issues, highlighting the importance of building upon existing knowledge rather than dismissing it.

Guided by the notion of the 'zero degree' of handiness, I worked with the organization to understand their current knowledge, skills, and ongoing initiatives. I focused on developing a relationship with the participants to understand their work environment. For example, I learned that they prefer to communicate more through the Whatsapp messaging app, which could easily be overlooked in these processes, but that is a critical component of making the collaboration happen. Finally, through this process, I enacted *designerly code-switching* (Reynolds-Cuéllar *et al.*, 2024) —where one must constantly review and assess the terminology used when interacting with groups in the field and outside. Similarly to acknowledging that there is an existing knowledge and practice that one must leverage, it is equally important to avoid imposing terminology or language that is not part of people's everyday vocabulary. For example, I initially avoided talking too much about 'professional' design, and instead, I centered my conversations with the organization on aspects of collaboration and capability building.

Through this project's initial relationship-building and planning stages, I attempted to move away from dominant design practices that tend to impose a 'novel' and 'more effective' way of doing things. Instead, I was learning about the organization's existing practices to outline ways my contributions would help them amplify the possibilities of their work and potentially continue their processes without the need for an 'outside expert.'

The initial phase of collaborating with SHOT culminated in approval from the organization to hold seven participatory workshops to learn about different design methods under the Transition Design umbrella that would support SHOT's ongoing projects. Once the approval was in place, I began designing a curriculum for the sessions, outlining learning objectives, logistical considerations, and expected results. The section below describes this process and includes brief overviews of the sessions.

Curriculum Design for Participatory Workshops

I designed a curriculum for seven participatory workshops that integrate sociocultural learning, situated cognition, and experiential learning principles anchored in the transition design framework. In the following section, I introduce the curriculum design principles and describe each session's learning objectives.

Sociocultural learning theory is primarily based on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition. This theory is particularly relevant because it argues that community, cultural context, and language are critical factors in facilitating learning processes across different contexts and communities. Guided by this theoretical perspective, I conducted a series of structured conversations (Kaner, 2014) with personnel in the organization and maintained asynchronous communication through text messaging and email. Over five months, I learned about their day-to-day operations, paying particular attention to their infrastructure, workflows, and communication practices. I focused on elements relevant to the curriculum design, such as common tools, project workflows, and terminology used within the organization, while setting aside broader organizational aspects not directly related to the curriculum's objectives. The structured conversations and asynchronous communication allowed me to identify specific examples of their work and integrate relevant elements into the curriculum. I documented my findings systematically, analyzing them to identify patterns in SHOT's operational language and practices that would resonate with participants and enhance their engagement with the curriculum content.

Situated cognition posits that knowledge is inextricably tied to the activity and context within which it is used (Lave, 1991). Guided by this theory, I collaborated closely with the organization to structure activities that would integrate directly into their work environment. To achieve this, I conducted preliminary discussions to understand the practical and spatial constraints of their setting. For example, I considered the available rooms and technology and how many hours they could invest in the process. Through these interactions, we confirmed that participatory workshops (Schuler and Namioka, 1993) would be the most effective format, as they allow for hands-on engagement and collective problem-solving—key aspects of situated learning. The workshops were designed as interactive sessions rather than traditional classroom-style lessons, aligning with the practical, contextual focus of situated cognition. The curriculum, developed specifically for these workshops, included exercises and examples relevant to the organization's day-to-day operations, ensuring participants could connect the material to their work.

Finally, experiential learning emphasizes learning through hands-on activities and reflection (Kolb, 2014), a process well-suited to design because it often requires learning by doing. In this context, experiential learning builds on situated cognition by highlighting the role of social interaction as a critical part of the learning process. With this approach in mind, I crafted the session agendas[1] to encourage active participation and collaboration. For example, I included activities that encouraged participants to discuss their reflections in pairs and designed prompts for them to work closely with one or two other organization members.

Curriculum's Learning Objectives

The participatory workshops were organized around four stages: understand, define, ideate, and prototype, which served as a heuristic for managing the different sessions. I defined learning objectives for each stage to guide the activities and determine the content. Budget limitations required that three sessions be held online and four on-site, which also influenced the definition of the learning objectives. The *Table 1* overviews each participatory workshop and its associated learning objectives *(See Figure 1)*.

Table 1. Learning objectives for participatory sessions with SHOT

Participatory workshops	Stage of the process	Learning objectives
Session 1 on Zoom:	**Setup and logistics**	N/A: Introduction and discussion with participants
Sessions 2 and 3 on Zoom	**Understand**	● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to explain methods for exploring and validating complex situations.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to map a 'wicked problem' considering the social, environmental, economic, political, and infrastructural dimensions using their existing knowledge or by applying design research methods.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to map stakeholder relations regarding a 'wicked problem' using their existing knowledge or by applying design research methods.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to explain the process of mapping the historical evolution of a wicked problem.**

Session 4	**Define**	● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to translate 'wicked problems' into clearly articulated challenges to foster collaborative action.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to articulate the role and importance of problem framing within the context of their work and apply it to their everyday tasks and projects.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able to apply a 'Challenge Mapping' tool **to identify an appropriate scope (framing) of an existing initiative in their context.**
Session 5	**Ideate**	● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to apply ideation methods based on fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration of ideas.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to articulate the differences between divergent and convergent thinking and to leverage both modes during ideation processes.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to apply ideation methods in their everyday tasks and projects.**
Sessions 6 and 7	**Prototype**	● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to formulate statements as part of an 'ecology of interventions'.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to explain prototyping methods and how to apply those in the context of their everyday tasks and projects.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to turn ideas into low-fidelity tangible forms to trigger different types of discussions and evaluate a project's potential direction.** ● At the end of this process, participants will be able **to describe what an iterative process means and how it influences all stages of a process.**

The learning objectives guided the content and activities for each session. In the following section, I describe the facilitation component of each participatory workshop, anchoring in the logistical and content considerations for collaborating with SHOT.

Figure 1.
Facilities of the
*Secretaria de Habitat
y Ordenamiento
Territorial*. Quito,
2024 (Credits:
Photograph by the
author).

Participatory Workshops with SHOT

I facilitated seven participatory workshops, guided by six strategic dimensions outlined by Napier and Wada (2016): people, time, environment, methods, tools (to make), and supplies (to take). These dimensions provided a structured framework for planning and executing each activity, allowing me to adapt the workshops to SHOT's specific needs and logistical constraints. Beyond introducing tools and content in each session, the workshops fostered collaboration within the organization. Participants often engaged in deep conversations about complex regional issues, questions of identity, and their organizational roles. This dynamic enriched the sessions and helped build a collaborative muscle across the group *(See Figures 2 and 3)*.

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Figure 2. Workshop participants in the *Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial*. Quito, 2024 (Credits: Photograph by the author). **Figure 3.** A few photographs and screenshots of the workshops with *the Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial*. Quito, 2024 (Credits: Photographs by the author).

Data Collection: Semistructured Interviews with SHOT Participants

After concluding the participatory workshops, I conducted a 30-minute semistructured interview with each participant. Semistructured interviews, a qualitative research method, combine open-ended questions with a flexible interview guide, allowing researchers to explore core themes while adapting to participants' responses (Kvale, 2009). I chose this method to foster in-depth dialogue, enabling insights into the lived experiences and values of the participants. Ten interviews were conducted via Zoom, centered around three main themes: participants' reflections on the overall process and its relevance (or lack thereof) to their work, the significance of local knowledge and expertise, and potential next steps for scaling this work further.

The overarching research questions of my dissertation directly informed the three main themes guiding these interviews. For example, by asking participants to reflect on the process's relevance to their work, I addressed what knowledge and skills are essential for designers and collaborators to engage meaningfully in complex, context-sensitive design processes. The table below shows an overview of how the research questions guided the development of the semistructured interview questions *(See Table 2)*.

Table 2. Guiding questions for semistructured interviews with SHOT participants.

Theme	Background	About the process	Local knowledge and expertise	Moving forward
Guiding questions	*Briefly describe your role in la Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial en Quito, EC.* *How did you decide to be part of this process?* *Why did you choose to do it?* *Was that entirely your decision?*	*Reflecting on the process, what are your main takeaways from it?* *What would you keep?* *What would you change?* *What are the things that you remember the most?* *What are the things that you struggled with?* *How do you define design now?*	*What do you think you knew before this process?* *What was entirely new for you?* *Does this knowledge apply to the context in which you operate?*	*How do you imagine your work now that you know the tools and methods you mentioned?* *Do you foresee any impediments to applying the knowledge you gained through this process?* *Would it be possible to continue embedding design capabilities in your work?* *What is something you wished I would have asked you?*

Data Collection: Surveys with SHOT Participants

When designed for qualitative research, surveys utilize open-ended questions to gather in-depth responses, allowing participants to express detailed thoughts and personal experiences (Dillman *et al.*, 2014). I used surveys as an effective and low-effort method to gather immediate reactions from participants during the process. Moreover, surveys helped me collect varied responses at scale, which allowed me to identify shared and divergent viewpoints from participants.

Before the participatory sessions started, I asked participants to complete a survey that helped me understand their understanding of design in the context of their work and their ongoing initiatives in the organization. Then, I asked participants to complete a survey after each session that helped me assess my pedagogical choices and their comprehension of different topics. Finally, at the end of the participatory workshops, I asked participants to fill out one final survey that focused on a broad evaluation of the process, how their understanding of design in the context of their work changed, and how they see the application of the different theories in their ongoing work.

Data Analysis of Semistructured Interviews and Surveys

I transcribed and coded each semi-structured interview and chronologically organized the responses to all the surveys. Then, I applied a thematic analysis approach to analyze the semistructured interviews and qualitative survey data, which is well-suited for identifying patterns and recurring themes in open-ended responses. This process began with an initial reading of all responses to gain familiarity with the data, followed by developing a preliminary codebook. A codebook is a structured guide for categorizing data and includes codes that represent specific themes, concepts, or patterns observed within the survey responses. Following guidelines by qualitative research experts (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Creswell and Poth, 2016), I developed the codebook through an iterative process. I began with broad categories that captured initial key insights from the data and then refined these categories over multiple rounds of coding. With each round, I reviewed and adjusted the codes to better reflect emerging themes and nuances, allowing the codebook to evolve in response to a more profound analysis.

Designing from Handiness: An evolving approach to Design Rooted in Local Conditions and Critical Consciousness

The participatory process with SHOT provided a structured framework for collaborative learning and reflection in a public sector context. Through this process, I explored how design can contribute to transdisciplinary efforts, supporting the careful consideration of sociocultural and environmental realities specific to SHOT's work. It also allowed me

to investigate the knowledge and skills necessary for both designers and their collaborators—community members, stakeholders, and other participants—to navigate complex transdisciplinary processes. While working with SHOT, I attempted to move away from dominant practices that ignore and erase existing knowledge and practices. Instead, I describe how my collaboration with this group constantly reframed our thinking and actions, problematizing and engaging in critical dialogues, seeking to create synergies rather than disruptions. This project resulted in a workshop curriculum that could serve as a reference for similar collaborative processes, a Miro board containing participants' contributions during each workshop, interview transcripts, several audio recordings and photographs, and survey responses.

Through this project, I observe examples of why designers working in transitions should concentrate on developing critical consciousness, as Freire (2020) defined, as a praxis that combines deep reflection with transformative action to challenge and address socio-political and economic contradictions. This process enables individuals to understand oppressive structures and actively work to transform them. By embracing this praxis, designers can expand existing knowledge and practices using local infrastructures rather than imposing external solutions. I use the term infrastructures in an expansive and mundane way, drawing on the work of (Irani *et al.*, 2010) to include entities that carry both practical and symbolic significance within design work. For example, Post-its and Sharpie markers, often overlooked in participatory workshops, may act as subtle enablers or subverters of existing knowledge in a community.

The research activities collectively contribute to developing the **designing from handiness** framework[5], an ongoing exploration of my doctoral research. In the next section, I present two discussions that are part of this ongoing exploration and development process.

Bridging Handiness and *Buen Vivir*: Towards collective and sustainable design practices

The participatory process with SHOT is a central activity in developing the **sensing handiness** and expanding collective handiness components of the designing from handiness framework. Building on the workshop findings, sensing handiness emerged as a process to immerse deeply in a context, capturing the artifacts and sociocultural conditions that shape people's daily lives. For example, participants' recognition of the value of local and technical expertise aligns closely with this principle, underscoring the importance of contextual immersion and observation. Similarly, **expanding collective handiness**—focused on cultivating and amplifying practical, lived knowledge from navigating their unique environments—was inspired by participants' emphasis on cross-departmental collaboration and shared ownership over solutions.

Sensing and expanding collective handiness resonate with the Latin American notion of *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay* in Quechua), which provides a framework for rethinking social organization and sustainable living. *Buen Vivir* emphasizes equity, harmony, and balance in relationships—both among humans and with nature—and aligns with efforts to

design from within a context, respecting and amplifying existing knowledge and practices (Beling *et al*., 2021; Vanhulst, 2015). Participants in the workshops reflected on how the process fostered integration across departments, addressing the silos that often impede systemic change. One participant noted:

> *"The process was new, not only in the way of sharing ideas in physical or digital form but also because normally the system has always come from the top down... However, here, when you allow all the people to give their opinion and technical vision, sometimes it makes us see that people even have a vision that we didn't have" (Translated from the original transcript in Spanish)[6].*

This reflection underscores the importance of collective processes that value individual expertise and create space for shared visioning. These moments connect to debates participants had about the 'common good,' which they described as both a driver of their daily work and a reminder of their purpose as public servants. In Ecuador, the common good is often associated with *Buen Vivir*, which views humans as part of a harmonious and interdependent system, fostering sustainable ways to meet needs while flourishing within one's territory.

Buen Vivir's ideals could complement the handiness framework by emphasizing relationality and contextual sensitivity, both key for designing transitions in the Latin American context. As Alberto Acosta noted during the 2008 constitutional reform in Ecuador, *Buen Vivir* serves as a guide for designing alternatives to dominant, unsustainable paradigms. However, as *Buen Vivir* has faced challenges in its implementation (Benalcázar and de la Rosa, 2021), the workshops also highlighted a similar tension between envisioning systemic change and navigating rigid institutional constraints. One participant reflected on how public servants, despite bringing expertise and purpose, often develop habits that undermine their ability to work effectively within such constraints.

By integrating the ethos of *Buen Vivir* into the designing from handiness framework, we can foster processes that balance immediate action with slower, reflective dialogues that honor the shared knowledge, histories, and territories of those involved. This approach bridges the conceptual grounding of *Buen Vivir* with the expansion of people's collective handiness, offering a pathway for co-creating sustainable, equitable solutions rooted in harmony with both people and their environments.

Understanding existing practices and infrastructures at hand

Design practices, particularly in contexts of systemic inequities, reveal an intricate interplay between tools, spaces, and temporalities that shape outcomes. Drawing on the participatory workshops with SHOT, reflections from journal notes, and insights from the interviews and surveys, I explored how tools, spaces, and time intersect to enable or constrain designing from handiness.

The participatory workshops provided a window into the layered challenges of operating within constrained infrastructures. My journal reflections show that while participants were highly engaged in the workshops, the sessions were also affected by challenges like limited resources, outdated equipment, and time pressures of a public-sector setting. For example, participants repeatedly complained about internet issues, and their time availability was a constant barrier to participation during the sessions. Throughout the sessions, some participants attended only at certain times or had to step out for brief periods to attend to requests from the organization. Participants' limited availability underscored the challenges of embedding reflective practices within institutional schedules dominated by urgency and immediate deliverables.

At the same time, I experienced moments of tension while facilitating the workshops, making me confront my design practice, especially after having lived abroad for almost five years. I realized I tend to expect the process to run smoothly and assume that tools and environments will be in my favor when facilitating a collaborative process. However, during this process, I kept re-orienting my approach to adapt and respond to the conditions at SHOT. One of my journal notes from session four of this process shows an example connected to this reflection:

> *"The offices were an interesting place as well. Located in the historic city center, they are in the mesh of social issues attacking the city of Quito. Their offices look so much like what I grew up seeing a public sector institution in Ecuador look like. Just enough space, old furniture, lots of noise, a lot of movement, poor technology to do this kind of work, etc. I took a photo of that as it is a completely different reality than what I have been used to the past four years. Even though it is different to facilitate collaborative action in these spaces, I am quick to adjust to that reality and operate to what we have at hand. I also somehow feel comfortable in spaces like this, where we are not blinded by the beauty of a space, technology, etc. Instead, I wonder if there are even more opportunities to work properly when we don't try to bring a disruptive change to their environment".*

This reflection led me to recognize the importance of building upon the existing knowledge and skills in the organization rather than attempting to overhaul everything in their environment. By expanding what people already know and do well, the process becomes less about imposing change and more about amplifying the potential within the given context. This approach respects the realities of constrained infrastructures and acknowledges that meaningful progress often emerges not from sweeping transformations but from small, deliberate adaptations that align with the unique dynamics of a place.

This perspective aligns with critiques of imposing external attitudes, which can be equated to a process of colonization, or the 'colonization of knowledge and of being' as explained by Alexander *et al.* (2018). Recognizing the power dynamics inherent in the roles of researchers, practitioners, and facilitators, adopting a self-critical attitude becomes essential to avoid perpetuating these colonial tendencies (Coghlan and Shani, 2005). By critically reflecting on my own expectations and practices, I aim to foster a more equitable and context-sensitive approach to design, one that values and elevates handiness —the local

knowledge and practices embedded in people's lived experiences—rather than overshadowing them.

This paper has focused on two main discussions—bridging handiness and *Buen Vivir* and understanding existing practices and infrastructures at hand—but other important insights also came to light during the research. These include how language can exclude or bring people into collaborative processes, how existing ways of designing shape collaboration, how the context influences and reacts to these efforts, and how 'problematizing' can lead to deeper reflections throughout the process. These ideas are critical to this ongoing work and will be explored further in future publications and my dissertation. This section is just a starting point in a process that continues to unfold *(See Figure 4)*.

Figure 4.
One of the rooms where I facilitated the workshops. Quito, 2024 (Credits: Photograph by the author).

Conclusion and next steps

This paper has presented an exploration of designing from handiness through a collaborative process with the Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial (SHOT) in Quito, Ecuador. By anchoring the framework in critical consciousness and an appreciation for local knowledge and practices, this work aims to contribute to design philosophy and practice that moves away from dominant, externalized approaches and instead fosters deeply contextual and relational practices.

Through participatory workshops and a commitment to integrating technical and community-specific knowledge, the SHOT project revealed the potential of this process to help break silos, promote interdepartmental collaboration, and amplify existing expertise. The findings helped with an initial iteration of sensing handiness—immersing in a context

to document and engage with its artifacts and sociocultural dynamics—and expanding collective handiness, which emphasizes leveraging practical and lived knowledge.

As a critical response to conventional design practices, this project contributes to transition design by proposing an approach that operates within contexts, empowering communities and fostering pathways for self-determination. By reframing design as a collective, situated process, designing from handiness aligns with efforts to dismantle oppressive structures and cultivate new conditions for sustainable and equitable transitions. In this sense, the principles of *Buen Vivir* (Sumak Kawsay in Quechua) serve as a valuable complement, offering a culturally grounded framework for exploring place-based notions of sustainability and equity.

While this paper provides an initial exploration and analysis, it also marks the beginning of an ongoing process. The insights shared here continue to shape my doctoral research, helping me refine the designing from handiness framework and identify new ways to apply its principles. The next steps could involve deepening this exploration in other contexts observing how handiness might manifest in different fields, regions, and communities. For instance, what does handiness look like in other complex systems, such as rural agriculture? How might it inform design practices in under-resourced urban areas? Such questions invite further inquiry and experimentation, opening opportunities for other researchers and practitioners to build on this work.

This exploration is inherently situated within a specific organizational and cultural context, but future investigations could expand its scope to examine how the framework interacts across diverse settings. This includes probing how varying sociocultural, environmental, and economic conditions influence the role of handiness in shaping design outcomes. These explorations could provide valuable insights into how design might further embrace relational, context-sensitive approaches.

In conclusion, this paper invites collaboration to advance the conversation on handiness and its implications for design, encouraging others to contribute to a growing body of work that reimagines what design can be and do in the face of contemporary challenges.

Acknowledgments

Notas

1. Paulo Freire introduced the concept of 'critical consciousness' in his seminal work, Education as the Practice of Freedom, originally published in Portuguese in 1967. This concept was further developed in his influential book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, first published in Portuguese in 1968 and later translated into English in 1970.

2. The word 'handiness' is the most appropriate translation from the Portuguese word *amanualidade*, which Vieira Pinto uses to describe three modes of handiness so that he can shift the underdeveloped priority from (1) readiness-to-hand to (2) work instead of shifting to (1) presentness-to-hand as Heidegger wanted. Translating *amanualidade* as 'readiness-to-hand' ignores the existence of the other two modes.

3. This example is adapted from an analysis by Rodrigo Freese Gonzatto and Luiz Ernesto Merkle in their paper, "Amanualidade em Álvaro Vieira Pinto: desenvolvimento situado de técnicas, conhecimentos e pessoas." The text presented here is my own interpretation and writing, drawing from the original Portuguese source.

4. I use the term 'session agendas' to refer to the document that guides my facilitation of the participatory workshops. The agenda usually contains time allocations and prompts for activities, important reminders for the facilitator, such as what materials are needed for an activity, among other critical aspects to ensure the success of a session.

5. It is essential to clarify that this paper presents an initial exploration of one project that feeds into my dissertation work to be completed by May 2026, so these are not absolute or final results.

6. Original quote in Spanish: *"El proceso fue nuevo, no solo en el tipo mismo de poner las ideas, por ejemplo, en sea física o en la computadora con los papelitos y todo eso. Porque normalmente el sistema ha venido siempre de arriba para abajo… Sin embargo, aquí cuando permites que todas las personas den no solo su tema de opinión, sino su visión técnica, a veces nos hace ver a las personas incluso un tener una visión que uno no tenía."* Online interview. August, 2024.

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Resumen: Este artículo explora el "diseño desde la manejabilidad", un marco evolutivo enraizado en la conciencia crítica y el conocimiento local, desarrollado a través de un proceso de colaboración con la Secretaría de Hábitat y Ordenamiento Territorial (SHOT) en Quito, Ecuador, bajo el paraguas del Diseño de Transición. El documento presenta dos componentes evolutivos del marco del diseño desde la disponibilidad: la detección de la disponibilidad -la inmersión en un contexto para documentar y comprometerse con sus artefactos y dinámicas socioculturales- y la expansión de la disponibilidad colectiva, que hace hincapié en el aprovechamiento de los conocimientos prácticos y vividos.

A través de talleres participativos, el proyecto invitó a los funcionarios públicos a cultivar sus capacidades de diseño, reflexionando al mismo tiempo sobre la finalidad de su traba-

jo y ampliando sus conocimientos especializados. Retos como la limitación de recursos, tecnología y tiempo pusieron de manifiesto la necesidad de un enfoque adaptable que respete y aproveche las condiciones locales. El documento presenta dos debates centrales: la vinculación de la manejabilidad con el concepto latinoamericano de Buen Vivir, que hace hincapié en los enfoques sostenibles y colectivos, y la navegación por infraestructuras limitadas para descubrir y ampliar las prácticas existentes dentro de las comunidades. Al replantear el diseño como un proceso colectivo situado, este trabajo critica los enfoques de diseño dominantes y propone una vía para capacitar a las comunidades a fin de fomentar transiciones sostenibles y equitativas. Aunque este documento representa una exploración inicial, sienta las bases para futuros estudios.

Palabras clave: Diseño desde la disponibilidad - Conciencia crítica - Diseño de transición - Capacidades de diseño - Talleres participativos - Disponibilidad

Resumo: Este artigo explora o "design a partir da praticidade", uma estrutura em evolução enraizada na consciência crítica e no conhecimento local, desenvolvida por meio de um processo colaborativo com a Secretaria de Habitat y Ordenamiento Territorial (SHOT) em Quito, Equador, sob a égide do Design de Transição. O artigo apresenta dois componentes em evolução da estrutura de design a partir da praticidade: detectar a praticidade - imergir em um contexto para documentar e se envolver com seus artefatos e dinâmicas socioculturais - e expandir a praticidade coletiva, que enfatiza o aproveitamento do conhecimento prático e vivido.
Por meio de workshops participativos, o projeto envolveu funcionários públicos para cultivar recursos de design, refletindo sobre o objetivo de seu trabalho e ampliando sua experiência existente. Desafios como recursos limitados, tecnologia e restrições de tempo destacaram a necessidade de uma abordagem adaptável que respeite e se baseie nas condições locais. O artigo apresenta duas discussões centrais: unir a praticidade com o conceito latino-americano de Buen Vivir, que enfatiza abordagens sustentáveis e coletivas, e navegar por infraestruturas limitadas para descobrir e expandir as práticas existentes nas comunidades.
Ao reformular o design como um processo situado e coletivo, este trabalho critica as abordagens de design dominantes e propõe um caminho para capacitar as comunidades a promover transições sustentáveis e equitativas. Embora este documento represente uma exploração inicial, ele estabelece as bases para futuras

Palavras-chave: Design a partir da praticidade - Consciência crítica - Design de transição - Capacidades de design - Workshops participativos - Praticidade