Co-designing Resilience: Practical *and* Social Skilling through Place-based Repair

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The environmental and social injustices stemming from consumer culture have made evident the necessity to rediscover repair, as a means against growing precarity. This article presents such effort through a pilot program that took place in regional Queensland, aiming to re-engage at-risk youth by exposing them to practices of creative repair. The program provided opportunities for the youth participants to repair preloved items and reuse materials while collaborating with mentors, creatives, and peers. The stakeholders' lived experience was documented via a co-design workshop, which was based on findings derived from interviews and visual data. According to its outcomes, practical and social skilling can enact self-confidence, communities of repair, and resource preservation. These, along with the program's blueprint, were included in a toolkit to support other regional communities facing similar challenges. To conclude, the program's learnings demonstrated repair as a place-based approach responding to a global condition, pragmatically addressing environmental and social emergencies.

Keywords
lived experience
social impact
community
at-risk youth
creative repair

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INTRODUCTION: REPAIR AS A RESPONSE TO ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL PRECARITY

Repair is omnipresent. It exists in many contexts and is defined by them. Notwithstanding being mostly connected to things, it is also embedded in communities that try to reconfigure how, where, and with what resources they should live; and in the urban fabric, which is in constant need of infrastructural repair. Repair choices, deriving from a combination of individual agency, social practices, and cultural frameworks, span from Do It Yourself (DIY) for fun to exhausting the lives of materials. Yet, repairing, as an individual or guild activity, has significantly diminished in the past few decades due to repair being designed out of things and substituted by low-cost, easily replaceable goods.

Users accepting this condition is attributed to the consumer psychology, which is driven by a false perception of material possessions as affluence and success (Kasser & Kanner, 2004). Marketing, television, and more recently social media, have played an important role in making this happen. By imposing perceptions of community, independence, beauty, and failure intertwined with consumerism, they have shaped identities defined by people's purchasing power (Mackay, 1997). In this respect, self-worth and belonging, as well as the construct of happiness, have become reflections of a narrative created to enable economic growth through mass consumption, whilst facilitating social exclusion and inequality. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979) reinforced the latter, by arguing that inequality derives from the drivers behind excessive consumption. These involve individualism, which disengaged people from the moral values of collectivism; being self-absorbed; and attributing unhappiness solely to the self (Esposito & Perez, 2014). The aforementioned traits are fostered by the consumer culture, which removed self-worth and happiness from their social context, and situated them within one's individual control. Enabled by this condition, the pursuit of happiness became a competition for affluence amongst

individuals, excluding at the same time "the kinds of human beings who care and/or who may need to be cared for" (Bauman, 2013, p. 50).

Having said that, the element of care, which the consumer culture has replaced with individualism and growing nihilism, is more needed than ever. Whilst the pursuit of happiness via consumption has been proven to be futile (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023), it has greatly contributed to social and environmental precarity, defined here as a "politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability" (Butler, 2009, p. ii). Disfranchised populations around the globe are increasingly impacted by environmental degradation and wealth inequality, yet consumerism is still the prevalent *modus operandi* informing design practices and respective psychologies. What this means is that design is still heavily oriented toward the production of unsustainable goods, and psychological needs continue to be superficially met by overconsumption.

Against this backdrop, critical design voices and various grassroots initiatives have acknowledged the urgency to adapt and take a different course of action concerning material use. Many have re-evaluated practices related to community resilience and resource management by putting repair at the forefront, defining it as a practice of care that celebrates the continued state of fragility, entrenched in all forms of life (Denis & Pontille, 2015). Taking a community-led perspective enabled them to regain some form of control over their organization and agency to make decisions (Escobar, 2004), together with adopting place-based approaches that invite a joint evaluation of communal needs and a shared agreement on its response to them (Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2023). These have brought to the fore lived experience as a crucial element of strategic design, on the basis "of knowledge exchange, collective learning and responding to emergent ideas and information" (Oliver & Cataldo, 2019, p. 10).

Repair is a crucial part of community-led efforts of sustainment. From this perspective, it goes beyond material maintenance and expands to the self, community, and socio-economic conditions. It relates to broadening self-confidence through practical skilling, problem-solving aptitude, and the ability for self-maintenance; relationships of interdependence where skills become communal through transgenerational exchange; and adaptation via collectively imagining alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008). This involves becoming substantially self-sufficient through the maintenance and reuse of resources, skills, and communal capabilities while recognizing the regenerative impact of repair on things, people, and conditions, along with its embedded innovation, manifested in what it brings forward (Jackson, 2014).

Hence, this article negotiates the multifaceted nature of repair, with an emphasis on place-based repair. As a case in point, it presents the 'Trans-

formative Repair for Social Change' (TRSC) pilot program that took place in regional Queensland. The TRSC program employed practices of creative repair as a means to re-engage at-risk youth who were or had been recently involved in the Youth Justice system or were assessed as being at risk of entering. Through a series of hands-on workshops, the program was designed to activate repair capability, with the support of local mentors and craftspeople. Creative repair is a concept grounded in the re-imaginative processes entrenched in repair, which always lead to an unexpected outcome, never the same as the original. As a practice, creative repair has been employed by artists in projects such as 'Crafting Waste' (Rubenis, 2016) and the 'Art of Recology' (Jackson & Kang, 2014), which exemplify how discarded items can be given a second life and become re-usable through artistic methods. Concerning 'social change', the program's goal was to provide at-risk youth with emotional, practical, and community support for social inclusion, belonging, and employability. The program was built on the premises of social design, incorporating aspects of youth-focused social change through design, instead of emphasizing it solely as a commercial practice (Armstrong et al., 2014); and of sustainable design, by adopting principles of repair, circular economy, and design for longevity.

BACKGROUND: FINDING A CONNECTION BETWEEN AT-RISK YOUTH AND CREATIVE REPAIR

The exploration on how design, art, and skilling in the form of repair could be combined to engage at-risk youth in regional communities, was rooted in findings from existing studies. Design is always part of the repair process, either as re-conceptualization, practice, or outcome, whereas art is often related to design through a creative re-imagining of an object. Both entail skilling aspects that can translate into repair or can be informed by repair-required skills. There is a lack of evidence related to specific community programs adopting creative repair as a response to young people's disengagement from traditional schooling, social exclusion, and interaction with the Youth Justice system. Yet, there are research outcomes that showcase the positive impact of art, design, and skilling, respectively, on at-risk youth (Chapman, 2003; Ellsworth, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2004), as vehicles to contest social exclusion (Thiele & Marsden, 2003). That being said, studies have found a connection between creative practices and the learning of skills, stressing the former's beneficial effects when employed to re-engage at-risk youth (Brownlee, 2003; Schlechty, 2001).

The programs that have been deemed more successful are the ones that advocate for at-risk young people to discover their passions and make a career out of them (Fuller, 2009). Examples of effective programs include the 'Making Tracks' research project in South Australia, which demonstrated how

active involvement of at-risk youth (14-15 years old) in two art programs ('Makin it Peachey' and '1:1') increased their self-value and self-investment in professional development (Roeper & Savelsberg, 2009). Another case study, 'Evolution', is a free, artist, and youth worker-supported visual arts program that arose from a partnership between Signal, a creative studio for young people (13 to 25 years old), and the Melbourne City Mission Frontyard Youth Services. A study conducted by Brown and Jeanneret (2015) showed how 'Evolution' helped its participants to develop self-confidence, reconnect with educational activities and their communities, and learn how to collaborate with each other and practitioners. It additionally brought to the fore artistic practice as "the primary point of connection" to accomplish engagement (Brown & Jeanneret, 2015, p. 14).

These findings are strengthened by research outcomes included in the discussion paper 'Arts, Creativity and Mental Wellbeing' (Bennett et al., 2022), linked to youth's mental health and its connection to creative practices, by designating their effect on building self-control, profound relationships, a skill set, and the ability to believe in themselves. They additionally help contest social exclusion and negative preconceptions on a societal level and allow young people to be more confident in pursuing experiences (Boydell et al., 2021; Davidson & Krause, 2018). Concerning at-risk youth, the Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ) model exemplified skilling and community involvement as crucial factors for youth's positive development, in contrast to traditional responses involving detention (Dillard et al., 2019).

Looking specifically into engaging at-risk youth residing in regional and rural areas, a report generated for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) stated that, to help them, it is important to develop social capital, defined by OECD as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (OECD, 2001, p. 41). These networks could facilitate the engagement of at-risk young people by providing "access to services, education and employment" (Davie, 2015, p. 47). Nonetheless, the same report stressed the urgency for schemes and programs outside established schools and government-led services, due to their limited capacity to accommodate at-risk youth's needs, especially in non-urban locations (Davie, 2015). As seen through the aforementioned studies, creative programs can contribute to both networking and skilling possibilities, making employment or becoming active and engaged civic participants feasible for at-risk youth in regional areas.

An additional element to consider regarding these schemes is the interconnection between environmental sustainability and social impact. For communities to be able to care for their localities they should be healthy and resilient, equipped with enough resources to keep going. Introducing repair to

at-risk youth exposes them to cognitive and practical skilling, collaboration, material knowledge, and environmental care, which together trigger an awareness of sustaining the self, the community, and the environment. The recognition of its positive social and environmental effect has been driving a revival of repair practices in many parts of the world through businesses, non-government organizations (NGOs), and social enterprises that operate "as social initiatives that aim to support ethical and affordable consumption, alongside new opportunities for employment" (Graziano & Trogal, 2019, p. 208). Making available practical knowledge linked to object longevity, circular economy, upcycling, and material value to at-risk young people enables them to adopt a sustainable mindset whilst also re-invigorating repair practices within their communities. This argument is supported by the success of grassroots and community-driven repair initiatives that provide services for products varying from clothes to small white goods, which extend their lives while also enhancing community-building and revenue-making. Well-known instances are the Repair Cafes, The Restart Project, and iFixit (Dewberry et al., 2016).

THE 'TRANSFORMATIVE REPAIR FOR SOCIAL CHANGE' TOOLKIT: RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

To test the idea that creative repair practices could help re-engage at-risk youth with their communities and equip them with skills that could open employability pathways, a pilot program took place in Maryborough, Queensland, between August 20 and November 26, 2021. This program entailed workshops that were designed to encourage skills acquirement, creative play with materials, and exposure to circular economy attributes, whilst keeping young men engaged and socially active. For its purposes, seven young men from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds between the ages of 15 and 19 were recruited through referrals from local high schools, Youth Justice, and community organizations, with one youth participant discontinuing after four weeks. The program involved over 100 hours of manual skilling with the mentoring and guidance of volunteers, cultural liaisons, artists, craftspeople, and facilitators from diverse age groups and cultural backgrounds, who were selected to foster conditions of trust and inclusion. All the members of the program are acknowledged here as stakeholders, with the at-risk youth being referred to as 'youth participants'.

Local spaces, offered by, and enacting a cultural and transgenerational connection with the local community were selected for the realization of the workshops, such as the Men's Shed, Moonaboola Aboriginal Corporation (MACorp), and Kahwun-Wooga. The 15 objects that were designed and created out of recycled materials were exhibited and were available for sale at the Gatakers Artspace in Maryborough, as part of the annual Fraser Coast 'Waste to Art' exhi-

bition. Toolboxes and chairs made from reused pallets, a 1950s kitchen hutch restored by using traditional refurbishment techniques, and an upcycled electric cargo bike, are examples of the items made by repairing and reusing preloved materials. The craftsmen, artists, and mentors showcased local expertise, making visible the capability existing in their area. Moreover, they made the young men participating in the program, part of a place-based repository of repair knowledge.

The practice of conducting a co-design workshop was chosen to capture the program's pain points and reflect on its successes, failures, and future potential (Figure 1). Co-design was selected due to being a strengths-based approach rather than an 'empathetic' process, with the people impacted by a phenomenon being directly involved in addressing it, testing assumptions instead of adopting them as 'facts', and making the stakeholders experts—instead of the researcher. In this manner, the stakeholders' contributions actively help the program generate social impact, by providing feedback and insights based on their lived experience. Its creation was informed by the analysis of data collected throughout the realization of the workshops. In detail, it was grounded in the findings that came out of triangulating a non-systematic literature review (around lived experience, social impact, and place-based models about community engagement and resilience), the content analysis of interviews with the program's stakeholders, and the visual content analysis of the collected visual data via photography and videos.[1]

1 For the collection of data, ethical clearance was obtained by the Research Ethics and Integrity Office for Research, Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2021/734).

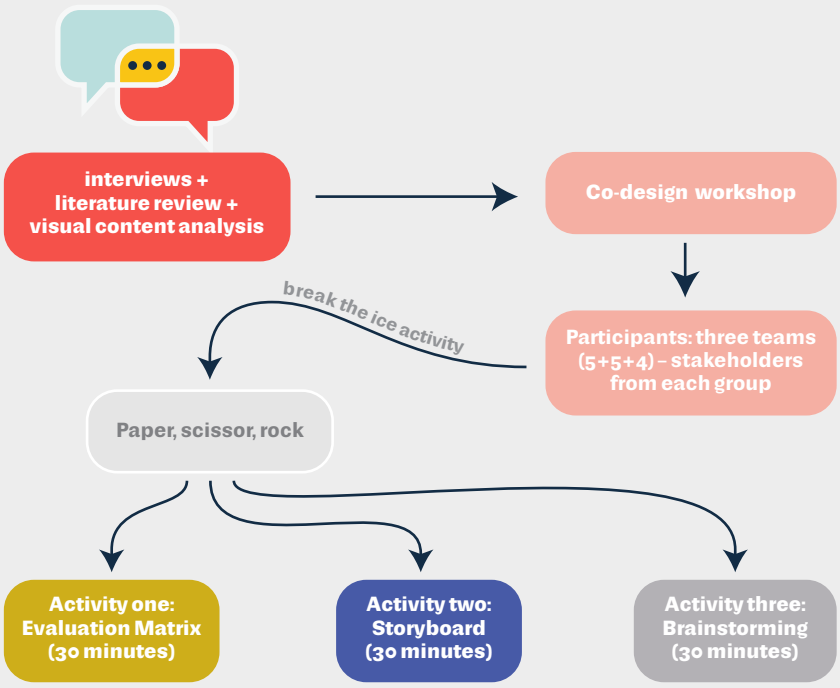

Figure 1: Co-design. Source: Kalantidou, 2022, redrawn.

Interviews were conducted with all stakeholders, who were exposed to the same questions and interview process. Only the program director/facilitator was interviewed with a different set of questions, so as to capture an in-depth understanding of their experience concerning various facets of the program. The content analysis exposed patterns regarding the stakeholders' evaluation of the skilling process, the youth participants' satisfaction with their skills acquirement, and psychosocial attributes impacted by participation in the program. The youth participants' answers revealed confidence in their new abilities, a positive and constructive perception of themselves, emotions of pride, and the development of relationships with peers and mentors. They additionally made evident a sense of belonging to the program via answers such as, "I want to stay here for the rest of my life" (Participant 5).

The visual content analysis brought to the fore the application of repair practices, unintentional and intentional nuances of non-verbal communication, and the progression of skilling. The visual data collected at the workshops and the exhibition illustrated skilling techniques, collaborative practices, moments of frustration and achievement, and most importantly, pride and collective ownership of the final products.

Based on all of the above, certain methods were selected for the co-design workshop, which was developed from the principle of doing 'research with' instead of 'researching on' young people (Black et al., 2023). In this context, all stakeholders were acknowledged as active collaborators in evaluating the program and re-designing its next steps. Inclusivity, respect, participation, and visibility were prioritized so as to create a safe space, especially for the youth participants, to explore their program experience. To expand the interview findings, the participants were invited to get actively involved in three activities. The Evaluation Matrix was selected to evaluate and reflect on the impact of the program; the Storyboard to assess the success of the steps taken for its realization and what can be done differently; and Brainstorming to come up with strategies able to support the long-term viability of the program. These activities were chosen according to the participants' literacy skills and their capacity to capture learnings for the future of the program, in addition to similar endeavors.

For the analysis of the data collected from the co-design workshop, the definition of impact was informed by Muir and Bennett's (2014) interpretation of the concept, including positive and negative, intentional and unintentional outcomes affecting the people and the community. To evaluate the impact of the program, a Theory of Change was created in its early days (Figure 2), which outlined the activities, assumptions, intermediate outcomes, and ultimate goals of the program. The co-design workshop (Figure 1), in conjunction with the interview findings and the visual content analysis, helped test the assump-

Figure 2: Theory of Change. Source: Kalantidou & Brennan, 2022, p. 8, redrawn.

tions and check if the intermediate outcomes outlined in the Theory of Change were achieved. The stakeholders confirmed that there was a strong engagement between mentors, peers, and youth participants. Furthermore, the attendance record and skill acquisition documented through the research process proved

correct the assumption that youth participants would consistently show up and learn new skills. The collected data also corroborated the assumption that youth participants would find a sense of achievement through learning new skills and engaging with their community. In terms of the intermediate outcomes, the youth participants were able to follow the structure of the program and meet its objectives despite not attending conventional school; acquired skills connected to repairing, making, and building; and became self/group-confident and active members of their community.

The co-design activities (Service Design Tools, 2022) offered helpful insights coming from the stakeholders. The Evaluation Matrix inputs made evident the building of relationships between mentors and mentees as well as between peers, identifying as positive the ease of sharing and working with older people, artists, and different mentors. They also showed that both mentors and youth participants felt that the skilling process was fruitful, leading to the acquisition of various repair and making practices, including learning a variety of making/repairing techniques and how to use several different tools. The Storyboard contributions demonstrated the stakeholders' profound understanding of the program, of what works and what does not, in addition to what can be improved. Their comments exhibited a great investment in the program's success, by emphasizing pain points that should be addressed, such as the need for a youth-owned workspace, provision of a transport bus, mental health, catering support, and more connection to schools and behavioral change programs (for example, to quit smoking). Finally, the Brainstorming activity aiming to collect thoughts about the long-term sustainability of the program led to ideas about pursuing more support from the community and municipal resources and sponsorships from local businesses. They also revealed that its long-term establishment could be supported by the provision of communication and transportation means for the youth participants (such as phones and e-bicycles), a family support case worker, and training regarding everyday skills such as reading repair manuals.

Going back to the initial research question 'How can creative repair practices help re-engage at-risk youth with their communities and equip them with skills that could open employability pathways?', the program demonstrated that self, community, and material aspects get repaired when young people are supported, engaged, and become skilled. The most common problems that follow a successful pilot program are the struggle to keep the momentum going, and its existence in isolation. For that reason, the learning from the research process and particularly the evidence of lived experience collected via the co-design workshop were translated into a toolkit (Kalantidou, 2022). The latter drew from examples including the 'Development Impact & You' toolkit (Nesta, 2015), the 'Social Innovation' toolkit (European Commission, 2018), and the 'Towards

Whole of Community Engagement' toolkit (Aslin & Brown, 2004). It was designed to share and expose practitioners, communities, and organizations to a blueprint for guiding similar programs, aiming at repairing their communities by instigating social impact and environmental sustainability. In addition, it was designed to trigger systemic change by exposing public and private organizations to ways in which repair can enable conditions of employability, diversion from interacting with Youth Justice, and social and environmental sustainability. This way, system players with agency such as local governments and councils, businesses, and philanthropists can partner with programs, provide funds and resources, and enact policy changes that can ensure their sustainability.

The toolkit makes available guidance and strategies to design an effective program, but also makes explicit the necessity for incorporating agility into its processes, regarding the constantly changing circumstances of people, communities, and environments. What this means is that working with at-risk youth in under-resourced regional communities is not a linear process, and it involves the need for a constant re-evaluation of conditions involving families, access to essential needs, anti-social issues, support from the community, and municipal services. 'Agility' also designates the ongoing redesign of the program to meet what the youth participants want to do and are good at doing, expand their thinking around civic purpose and agency, potentially secure them employment, and keep them safe— physically and emotionally. For the aforementioned reasons, continuous evaluation and reflection on the programs' activities and outcomes should be embedded in its design.

CONCLUSION: REPAIRING PSYCHOSOCIAL AND MATERIAL BROKENNESS

For at-risk youth residing in regional communities, repair can be a means of self-actualization. This was empirically evidenced through the TSRC program, which showcased how its design around repair enacted change on so many different levels: from instilling self-worth in young men to creating a community of repairers and preserving resources. The youth participants, along with the rest of the stakeholders' lived experience, became part of the program's evolving design through the co-design process, in order to capture the social impact happening and the potential to widen and strengthen it. Its findings, in addition to data collected through the research process, demonstrate the program's positive effect by helping a community re-engage with its at-risk youth, while also developing pathways for skills exchange and circular economy-driven employment.

By acknowledging precarity as a global condition and unpacking it as a place-based phenomenon, the program provides a pragmatic response to environmental and social crises. In this respect, repair becomes an element of care

and innovation, connected to specific circumstances of brokenness, such as interactions with the Youth Justice system, school codes of conduct resulting in non-attendance, community disengagement, and lack of purposeful skilling. It additionally gets associated with an overarching environmental challenge that requires place-based management of resources. With the support of the local community, the at-risk youth were given the opportunity to adapt to their social and natural environment. In spite of this being an ongoing and non-linear process, the young men were immersed in conditions of collective repair and positively impacted by what they learned through it. By making visible the community's agency, the program exhibited how its existing capacity can help repair the psychosocial and material brokenness that affects it. Despite its limited scope and resourcing, the program's pilot aimed to instigate meaningful social change, which could gradually inform service and systemic designs, to be enacted with the support of local public and private organizations. This and other examples around the globe beg for a local capability to be acknowledged, resources of repair to be unearthed, and at-risk youth voices to become part of designs responding to social and environmental precarity. **D**

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