

Design Factory Global Network

*as experienced by
our members*

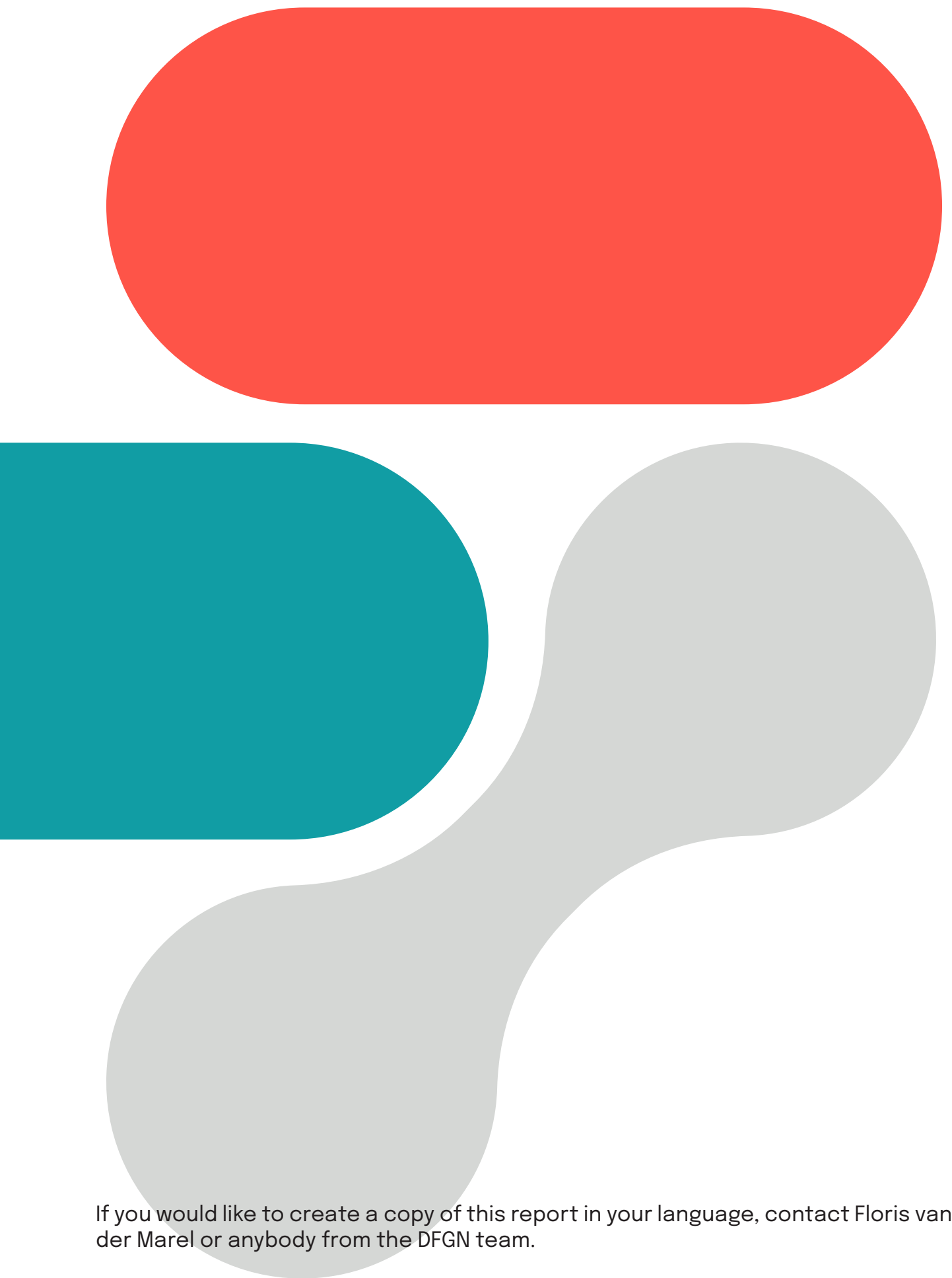


A''

Aalto University
Design Factory

DF
GN

Design
Factory
Global
Network



If you would like to create a copy of this report in your language, contact Floris van der Marel or anybody from the DFGN team.

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Contents

Introduction	1
Foreword	3
Design Factories in the Global Network	5
 Descriptions of the network	 17
A common ambition	19
Four community principles	21
 Value experienced from the network	 27
Ways of engagement	29
We collaborate and experiment	31
We provide opportunities for students	33
We create funding and research applications	35
We legitimise and enhance each other's practice	38
 Drivers supporting our members	 39
We invest in each other	42
We inspire and benchmark	45
We evolve together	48
 Going forward	 51
New practices emerging from the network	53
Afterword	57

Introduction





Foreword

This report captures a range of perspectives shared during focus groups with representatives of the Design Factory Global Network. As a constantly evolving community, the reflections in this report reveal both what the network is today and provoke ideas for what it could or should become in the future.

The Design Factory Global Network is a network of innovation hubs in universities and research organisations across five continents. For the past 14 years, the network has grown through the active contributions of its members, united by a shared aim: to drive change in teaching, learning, and research through a passion-based culture and effective problem-solving.

Our shared understanding and common ways of working enable the Design Factories to collaborate efficiently across cultures, time zones and organisational boundaries. We unite diverse minds, cultivate partnerships, and drive meaningful change in education, believing that innovation and global collaboration has no boundaries.

In April 2025, we conducted thirteen focus groups with representatives from up to three different Design Factories at a time. Of the 38 Design Factories, 26 participated with one or more representatives, exploring the network's role and benefits, and key moments that have shaped our way of working.

The report begins with a brief overview of the specialisations of each Design Factory, based on self-submitted descriptions. It then explores how representatives described the global network, distilled into a common ambition and four community principles.

Next, we present the value members gain from the network, through engagement by teachers, students, researchers, and managers. This value is driven by our commitment to invest in each other, inspire one another, benchmark practices, and evolve together - which is covered in the fourth section.

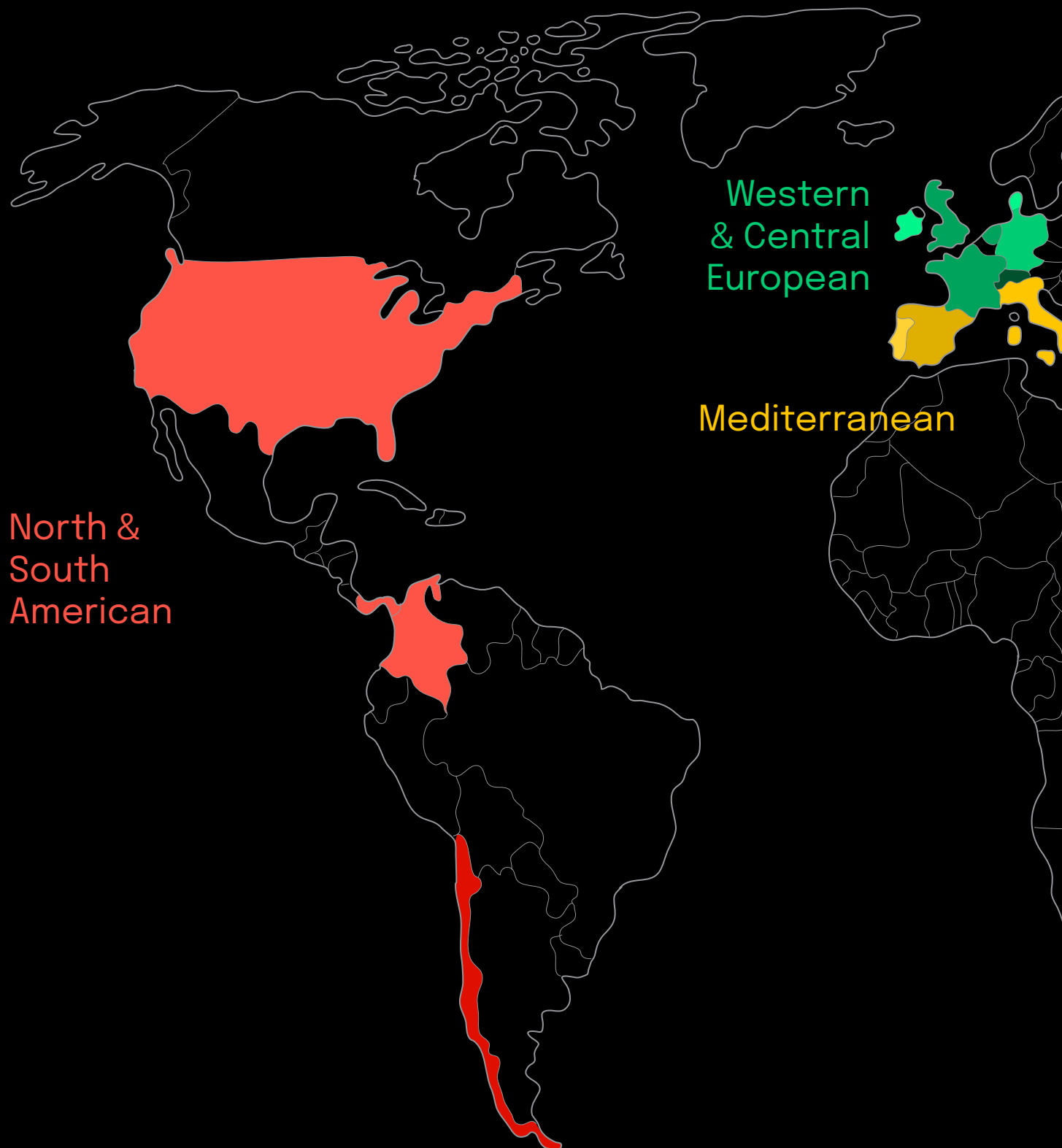
Finally, we reveal some emerging practices that are generating new energy and value for our members - pointing to where we might go next, together.

Floris van der Marel





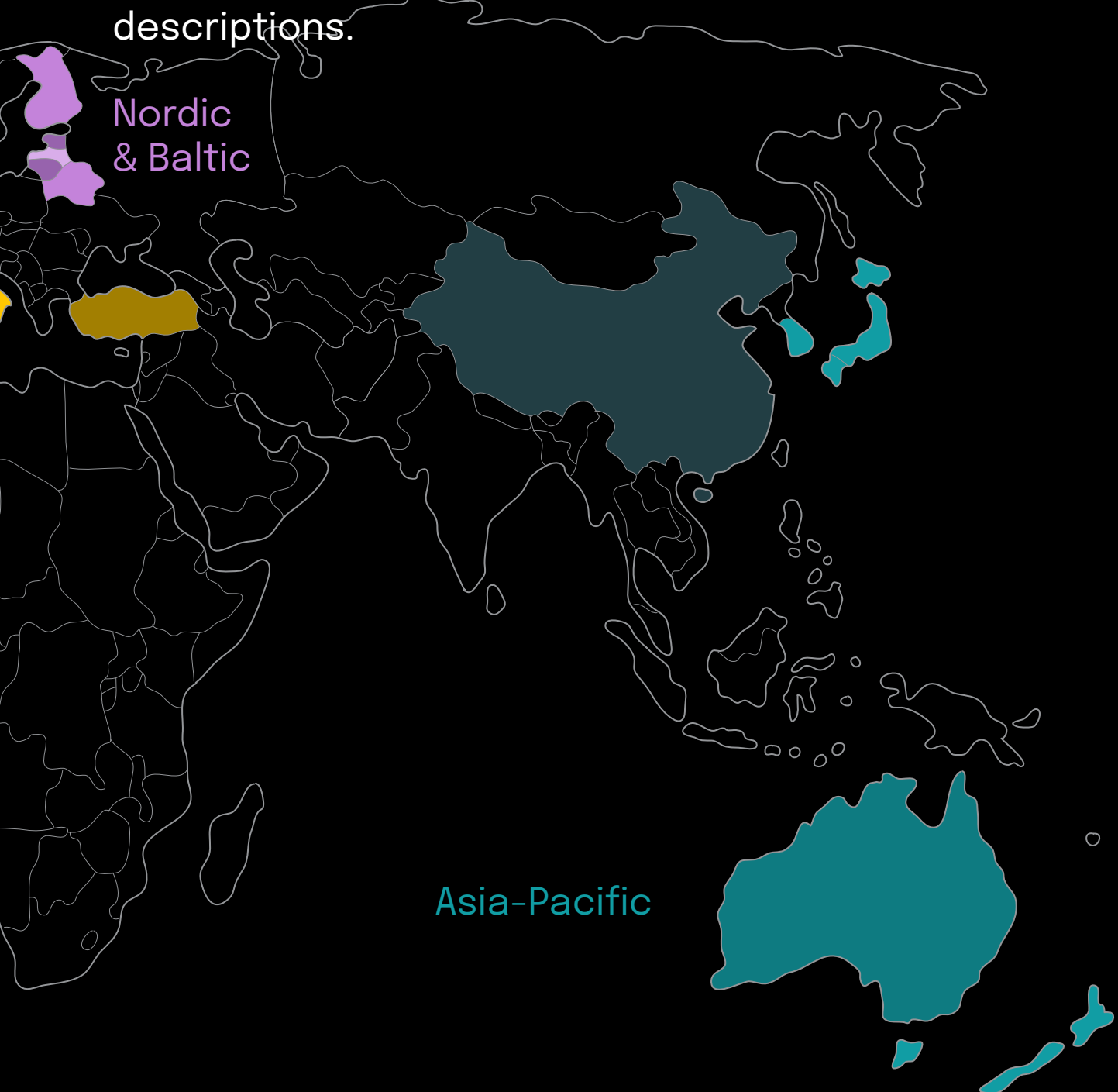
Design Factories *in the Global Network*




Each Design Factory brings a unique flavour to the network. The next spreads contain brief summaries of each Design Factory's uniqueness based on self-submitted descriptions.

For more information, visit:

dfgn.org/the-network/



North & South American *Design Factories*



NYC Design Factory

Pace University, New York City, USA

NYC Design Factory merges tech expertise with design thinking to develop inclusive, sustainable solutions that serve people and society.

St. John's University Design Factory

St. John's University, New York City, USA

St. John's University Design Factory fosters passion-based learning, connecting students, faculty, and industry to build innovation and entrepreneurship skills.

Design Factory Javeriana Bogotá

PUJ, Bogotá, Colombia

Design Factory Javeriana Bogotá drives innovation rooted in real societal needs, emphasising community, emotional connection, and trust across all sectors.



DDHUB-Duoc Design Hub

Duoc UC, Santiago de Chile, Chile

DDHUB promotes transformative change by harnessing the power of design to drive innovation, education, and meaningful societal impact.

Cali Design Factory

PUJ, Cali, Colombia

Cali Design Factory designs beyond disciplines for global good, using design to foster connection, understanding, and transformative action.

iCubo UDD

Universidad del Desarrollo, Santiago de Chile, Chile

iCubo UDD focuses on innovation and interdisciplinarity, offering hands-on programs like dLab and Interdisciplinary Labs to tackle real-world challenges.



Porto Design Factory Porto

Polytechnic, Porto, Portugal

Porto Design Factory focuses on industrial design and product-service innovation; its GTI course unites global teams to solve real challenges.

Fusion Point

ESADE, Universidad Politècnica de Catalunya and IED Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Fusion Point fosters future leaders through creativity and innovation, focusing on sustainability, health, mobility, and the green-digital twin transition.

Design Factory Aveiro

PCI - Creative Science Park Aveiro Region, Aveiro, Portugal

Design Factory Aveiro connects research and industry by developing design, prototyping, and communication projects that implement new technologies and solutions.

UPV Design Factory

Universidad Politècnica de València, Valencia, Spain

UPV Design Factory focuses on soft skills and prototyping, supporting 60 student groups with training, facilities, and local collaborations.

Mediterranean *Design Factories*

SEIUNISA

University of Salerno (UNISA), Salerno, Italy

SEIUNISA focuses on student entrepreneurship, offering training, mentoring, grants, and innovation ecosystem access to turn student ideas into ventures.

Design Factory Shenkar

Shenkar College, Tel Aviv, Israel

Design Factory Shenkar focuses on global interdisciplinarity, SDGs, Human-AI ethics, and design thinking, offering immersive, real-world challenge-based workshops.

Oper.Space

University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Oper.space empowers people and organisations to co-create solutions for societal issues by fostering a sensitive, connected culture of innovation.

METU Design Factory

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

METU Design Factory fosters interdisciplinary collaboration between academia, students, and industry, supporting diverse R&D and product development projects.

Design Factory London

Brunel University London, United Kingdom

Design Factory London fosters interdisciplinary, hands-on innovation, supporting entrepreneurship, tech exploration, and global collaboration to solve real-world challenges.

Design Factory Manchester

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, United Kingdom

Design Factory Manchester designs inclusive, place-based sustainable innovation through participatory research in creative regeneration, co-operative enterprise, and climate action.

Design Factory Birmingham

Birmingham, United Kingdom

Design Factory Birmingham fosters innovation and future-ready graduates through interdisciplinary teaching and global industry collaborations solving real-world challenges.

Future Design Factory

NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden, the Netherlands

Future Design Factory uses Future Thinking and Design-Based Education to create visionary, sustainable solutions with students, educators, and industry.

Forge Design Factory

TUS Limerick School of Art and Design, Limerick, Ireland

Forge Design Factory builds a regional design ecosystem in Ireland, connecting stakeholders to foster innovation, sustainability, and enterprise resilience.

Design Factory Nantes

Université de Nantes, Nantes, France

Design Factory Nantes combines design, engineering, and social sciences to train UX professionals who address companies' contemporary challenges.

Design Factory Stuttgart

ARENA2036, Stuttgart, Germany

Design Factory Stuttgart blends Design Thinking, Scrum, Kintsugi, Ikigai, and change management through agile student projects and tailored workshops.

Design Factory Pforzheim

Hochschule Pforzheim, Pforzheim, Germany

Design Factory Pforzheim is an interdisciplinary innovation platform empowering future entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs through collaboration with students, educators, and regional partners.

inno.space Design Factory Mannheim

Hochschule Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany

inno.space focuses on human-centred innovation and rapid prototyping, developing 21st-century skills through hands-on, iterative, real-world problem solving.

CERN Ideasquare

CERN, Geneva, Switzerland

IdeaSquare pioneers experimental education, disruptive thinking, and interplanetary innovation through bold, challenge-based courses tackling global and planetary challenges.

Western & Central European *Design Factories*

Aalto Design Factory

Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland

Aalto Design Factory is a hub for product development education, research and practice that explores novel formats and insights on development collaboration and interdisciplinary education for innovation.

HAMK Design Factory

Häme University of Applied Sciences, Hämeenlinna, Finland

HAMK Design Factory enables all students to tackle real industry challenges through interdisciplinary projects across HAMK's seven diverse campuses.

Sandbox

University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

Sandbox focuses on Digital Product Management, preparing future product managers within the University of Tartu's digital innovation ecosystem.

Viikki Food Design Factory

University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Viikki Food Design Factory pioneers sustainable food system innovations, engaging students and partners through initiatives like the Food SystemiCity project.

RTU Design Factory

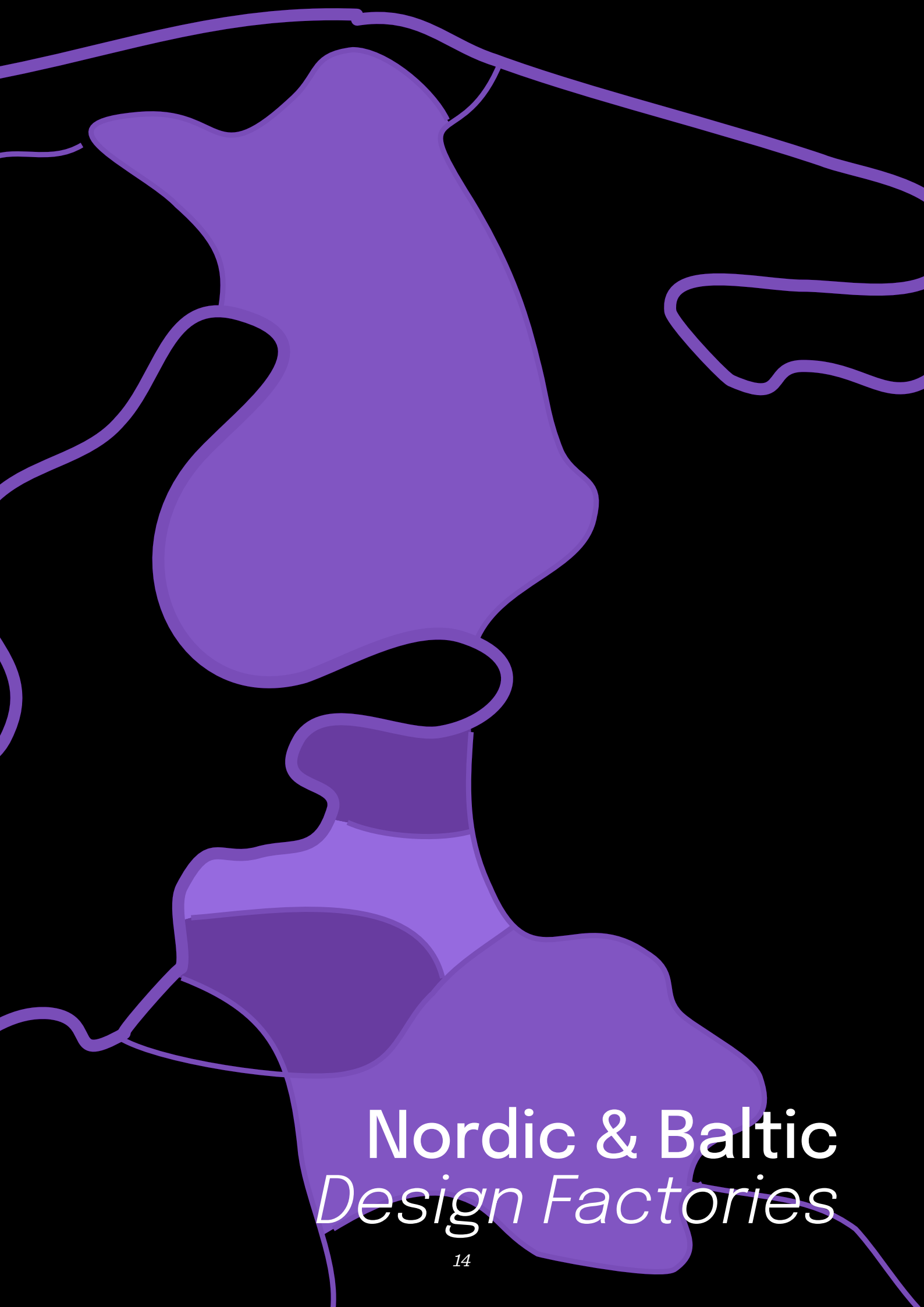
Riga Technical University, Riga, Latvia

RTU Design Factory inspires all RTU students to become innovators through hands-on grants programs, workshops, and collaborative hackathons.

VILNIUS TECH “LinkMenu fabrikas”

Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius, Lithuania

VILNIUS TECH “LinkMenu fabrikas” connects the [im]possibles, blending rapid prototyping, media, and virtual production to create unique, interdisciplinary student pathways.

The background of the slide is black, featuring several large, organic, and somewhat abstract shapes in various shades of purple. These shapes are layered, with some appearing as solid fills and others as outlines or semi-transparent overlays, creating a complex, modern aesthetic. The shapes are primarily located in the upper and middle portions of the frame, with some extending towards the bottom.

Nordic & Baltic *Design Factories*

Asia-Pacific *Design Factories*



Sino-Finnish Centre

Tongji University, Shanghai, China

Sino-Finnish Centre fosters innovation through international education, research, and collaboration between Aalto, Tongji, students, companies, and scholars.

Design Factory @SIT

**Singapore Institute of Technology,
Singapore**

Design Factory@SIT supports industry through user-centric, co-creative innovation projects, offering students real-world interdisciplinary learning experiences.

Design Factory Korea

Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea

Design Factory Korea connects education and industry through interdisciplinary, problem-based learning to build an experimental, innovative knowledge ecosystem.

Hannam Design Factory

Hannam University, Daejeon, South Korea

Hannam Design Factory unites students and faculty from seven disciplines, fostering creative outcomes through multidisciplinary teamwork and team teaching.

nandin Innovation Centre

ANSTO, Sydney, Australia

nandin Innovation Centre advances nuclear science through co-creation, experimentation, and collaboration between ANSTO, entrepreneurs, students, and industry.

Kyoto Design Lab

Kyoto Institute of Technology, Kyoto, Japan

Kyoto Design Lab explores design thinking, entrepreneurship, and adaptive design, offering global innovation courses and landscape-based digital design projects.

Swinburne Design Factory

Melbourne Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

Design Factory Melbourne tackles complex problems with design thinking, offering hands-on, interdisciplinary collaboration between students, researchers, and industry.

Design Factory NZ

Wintec, Hamilton, New Zealand

Design Factory NZ is a co-creation space where students tackle complex, real-world challenges with industry and community partners.



Descriptions *of the Global Network*

From representatives' descriptions of the Global Network, a shared ambition and four guiding principles emerged. Our ambition defines what we hope to achieve together; our principles shape how we collaborate to get there:

1. We shape the network
2. We are open
3. We are supportive
4. We are different



A common ambition

Representatives each described their own Design Factory's particular ambition. While there were many elements that make each Design Factory unique, an underlying, dominant theme also emerged across the responses.

“

A degree is just the bare minimum to get the job. Companies want to know what else a person has done – what makes them interesting, what proves they can work under pressure, and in difficult environments. Our cross-disciplinary approach better prepares our students for this reality.

“

We have students come to us and say, ‘I worked on this project for 12 hours, I went home, and I was still thinking about it. I came back the next day, and I’m still working on it and I love it. That’s education, that’s creating an environment where students feel like they’re coming to learn with joy and curiosity. If you can create that, then that’s a win.

“

We are a group of like-minded people collaborating on reimagining education. And that has different aspects. What do we reimagine? How do we reimagine it in the classroom? How do we reimagine it in collaboration with industry partners? How do we reimagine it through international exchanges? In essence, how does this reimagined education experience prepare students for tomorrow?

Design Factory Global Network members see the network as a collaboration among innovation hubs in universities and research organisations worldwide, operating both as separate entities and collectively to challenge and reimagine interdisciplinary design education, ensuring that our students are better prepared for the future.

“

We do things differently, but always at high quality, providing fellow members and partners with the best experience possible, and this is what differentiates us from other networks.

“

It’s about creating new knowledge, to challenge existing premises and ways of working, and not reinforce what companies do already. We prepare students for the industry of tomorrow, the new landscape that they can create.

Four community principles

Based on the descriptions shared by Design Factory representatives about the core of the Design Factory Global Network community, four principles emerged that define our way of working.

These principles reflect how representatives experience the network and how they described its collaborative culture.

1 We shape the network

Representatives described how their local Design Factory is shaped by the people who are part of it at any given time. The composition of each team influences the types of projects undertaken and the direction of research. Many note how the swift integration of newcomers' passions and skills is made possible by the flat hierarchies that characterise Design Factories across the network.

This low-threshold environment is seen as key to fostering what one representative called "learning environments where students can have fun and bring their whole selves." Others point to shared coffee rooms, community-building activities, and shared responsibilities with students as everyday expressions of this openness.





One person describes:

“

When guests with suits and ties, such as big bosses, rectors or presidents, come to see the Design Factory, we have students explain what the Design Factory is. And you can always see them wonder, ‘How is this possible?’ and it shifts their thinking in terms of how things can be done differently.

This appreciation for low hierarchy extends to the Global Network level. Several representatives highlight that the Design Factory Global Network differs from other networks in that it shares values rather than a fixed structure, curriculum, or course. While this flexibility can sometimes be complex, it is also described as a source of strength. People refer to the network as a “community of like-minded people and organisations,” where members are free to do their own thing while still finding kinship with one another.

Values such as honesty, inclusion, and vulnerability are seen as closely tied to this flat structure. Many appreciate that the network is shaped and reshaped by its members, and that everyone has the opportunity to leave a mark. One person notes, “everybody always wants to collaborate.” This sense of being on the same team enables quick communication and the collective shaping of “who we are, where we’re going and what we can achieve.”

As members join or change roles, the tone of conversations changes as well. This dynamic is seen not as a problem but as a strength:

“

The conversations we had back in 2019 are different from the ones we had in 2024. Indeed, the network has changed; it’s not what it used to be. And I’m happy it’s not what it used to be. The network evolves with its people. The network is its people. And as new people come on board, they shape and energise the interactions in different ways.

2

We are open

Representatives often describe the network as a community, or more specifically, a community of practice. They explain that the connection between members comes from doing similar work, which makes it “meaningful to interact with one another, share practices, and exchange learnings.” While there is a strong sense of like-mindedness, this does not mean uniformity. Design Factories work on a range of themes including innovation in education, design, research, and inclusive learning environments. What brings us together is not a single focus but shared values; values that create a strong global bond and allow people to connect on a human level, “supporting emotional, personal, and professional engagements.”

Our spirit of openness goes beyond exchanging ideas. Representatives regularly point to the way creativity

and expertise flow across the network to support new project developments and collaborations. Student projects and staff partnerships are frequently mentioned as tangible examples of how this openness translates into action – for many, this the main benefit of being a part of the Design Factory Global Network. One person notes:

“

We are always looking outwards and looking to help, share, experiment, and collaborate. This openness means there are no secrets. This is a very co-create atmosphere and there is no ego – that’s what makes it nice, and this should never change.

Newer members also describe the community as positive and welcoming. They note that “knowledge is never gatekept” and that others are consistently willing to share. Through events and shared projects, newcomers quickly gain access to the foundational principles and practices of the network. For many, the openness of the network is tied to its broader ambition: to contribute positively to the world, often focusing on environmental and social sustainability. As one representative puts it, this commitment remains constant “regardless of the challenge we are addressing.”



3

We are supportive

Representatives describe Design Factories as entities that often operate against the grain of their institutional contexts. Striving to innovate within systems that may resist change can bring frustration, doubt, and fatigue. In this light, many see the Design Factory Global Network as a space that helps us reach beyond our local constraints. By connecting with others in similar situations, we find mutual encouragement, exchange coping strategies, and avoid becoming too shaped by our own institutions.

People emphasise that our interactions within the network are filled with passion and empathy – qualities that allow us to work together effectively. One representative reflects that there is never a conflict in values when collaborating across the network.

Another highlights the importance of joy as a working principle:

“

We have fun. We enjoy. We are happy. This doesn't mean that we don't have problems, but we put a lot of effort to have fun. While having fun, we do the things that we're supposed to do. Having fun is essential for innovating.

The overall tone of engagement in the network is described by representatives as with “love and kindness,” and unmatched energy. For many, connecting with others in the network leads to “an extreme high.” Others emphasise how the network provides a well-curated “safe and welcoming space” where “very prosocial and altruistic thinking” flourishes and curiosity is encouraged.

Importantly, this supportive spirit persists despite changes in who is present. As one person puts it:

“

Even though the members or representatives are changing, I still feel the same vibe. I still feel like the niceness and openness.”

4

We are different

Despite sharing common ambitions and principles, many representatives note that “our Design Factory is a little bit different.” Across the network, there is wide variation in how Design Factories are structured, what we focus on, and how we engage with our institutional contexts.

Representatives emphasise that joining the Design Factory Global Network does not mean losing one’s identity. As one person puts it, membership does not mean being “bulldozed or taken away.”

“

Each Design Factory has to have its own culture and way of working that’s unique to them because otherwise the network would be a cookie-cutter. And we’re not cookie-cutter pieces; our cookie-cutters are all different, but we can still come together to create a cookie jar of delicious treats, right?

This diversity is not just accepted – it is celebrated. Representatives describe the network as culturally rich, giving access to a wide range of ways of thinking, collaborating, practical approaches, working methodologies, and designing learning experiences. Our members express excitement about embracing even more diversity in the future to bring in new ideas and perspectives.

Design Factories vary widely in form and focus. Some are embedded in larger innovation hubs that combine design, entrepreneurship, and innovation, while others operate within academic departments or as entirely independent units. Some run their own courses; others collaborate with faculty or provide international project opportunities. Some have no students of their own and focus more on industry collaboration. Others are geared toward skill-building, while some lean more heavily on research.

“

Our Design Factory is pretty different because we don't have courses, yet visiting other Design Factories always brings me new ideas.

“

It's quite refreshing to kind of hear how the other Design Factories have their own perspective about students, whereas for us, it's more like with our industry partners and industry clients.

Representatives emphasise that the form each Design Factory takes is shaped by its institutional mandate, size, budget, and location. These factors influence their capacity to engage students and staff or pursue research and funding. Some may need to be more active in research, while others require more international collaboration; the Design Factory Global Network embraces all. The absence of a one-size-fits-all model allows each Design Factory to grow on its own terms while still learning from both those that are similar and those

that are very different.

“

One of the things that attracted us to Design Factory Global Network was that there is freedom to be who you want to be in this community. Simultaneously, it's nice to have unifying pieces that connect us all. We are fine with being a bit different, because we can learn from how others are doing things.

While local realities may vary, the network creates cohesion by sharing best practices, peer learning, and collaboration, which inform and support local endeavours. Representatives describe the network as a source of inspiration and opportunity; one where you can exchange ideas, send and receive students, and join or propose projects. Even when circumstances don't always allow full participation, the intention to collaborate remains strong. That spirit sustains a sense of belonging.

“

No matter how we are changing locally, we are always connected to the network. We always have a sense of North, reminding us of our Design Factory origins. So we remember our values, who we are, our identity, and what we are here to do. So that's very important for us.

The next section explores how the Design Factory Global Network supports its members in turning these values into action.

A man with glasses and a woman are working together on a project. The man is wearing a grey sweater and a lanyard, and the woman is wearing a dark top. They are both looking down at a transparent cube model on a table. The man is holding a small object, possibly a piece of the model. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and a sign that says "Join... Jozzy".

Value *experienced from the network*

Through various ways of engagement (presented on the next spread) this section explores what our members gain by belonging to the Design Factory Global Network. This includes opportunities for collaboration and experimentation, for connecting and exchanging students, for funding and research applications, and for enhanced legitimacy.



Ways of engagement

Design Factory Global Network's first way to engage is the DF Y? bootcamp. Once a member has joined the network, they are added to Slack to connect with other members. All Design Factories have their doors open to visiting members, whether they come from near or far to showcase their practices, share resources, or simply sit down for a chat.

Every year, we organise the International Design Factory Week, the Unboxed conference, and a number of network-wide online events, such as the World Design Factory Day. Additionally, members host a range of collaborative events and gatherings.

Formerly known as 'Design Factory Bootcamp' and 'Design Factory LAB101'

DF Y?

Design Factory. Why?

Held at Aalto Design Factory, this event offers both virtual and onsite training for newcomers eager to immerse themselves in the Design Factory culture and start crafting experimental plans for their Design Factories.

Slack

Slack is the official communication channel for Design Factory Global Network members to send and receive updates on network activities and interact with other Design Factories. Design Factories can add anybody they wish to add.

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WDFD

World Design Factory Day

Our annual virtual celebration highlights initiatives from Design Factories worldwide, which is open to the public.

Online Gatherings

Every month, a virtual gathering is hosted by one or several Design Factories about a topic of choice to share best practices, initiate discussions, and explore collaboration opportunities.

Formerly known as 'Design Factory Global Network research'

IDFW

International Design Factory Week

Once a year, representatives from all Design Factories gather physically for one week to collaborate and share best practices at one of our Design Factories. During this community event, we refuel our spirits and develop plans for international collaboration.

During COVID, organised as the virtual International Design Factory Festival

Unboxed

Research Conference

UnBoxed is a two-day conference that takes place during IDFW, inviting Design Factory researchers, practitioners, and experts to share research and best education practices.



We
collaborate
and
experiment

We provide
opportunities
for students

We
create
funding and
research
applications

As a design community, representatives describe the network as a space that thrives on generating a wide range of ideas before deciding which ones to develop further. The International Design Factory Week, often referred to as an “explosion of creativity and excitement,” plays a key role in this. It is seen as a moment where “tons of ideas and projects” are generated, helping members collectively refocus on their intentions while surfacing new collaboration and development opportunities. This spirit of wanting to collaborate stays with participants long after the week ends.

Experimenting together

While not every project proceeds, often due to competing priorities at home institutions, representatives highlight the annual project development workshops as fertile ground for new collaborations. These projects are typically explored further in a hybrid way, partly online and partly in person, depending on time and budget. One such workshop has led to a Horizon Europe project, while an informal conversation during another sparked a three-year collaboration between two Design Factories.

One year, the annual event occurred virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although online events generally don't generate as hype as face-to-face events, this “festival format across time zones where different people delivered sessions, coordinated get-togethers, facilitated workshops - it just worked!” Participants waking up at odd hours to join sessions is seen as a strong signal of shared commitment.

Not all experimentation begins at the annual gathering. Two Design Factories recently piloted an international student exchange just to see what might happen. Representatives consistently mention how easy it is to “create, suggest, join, and participate in projects” within the network. When new international initiatives emerge, Design Factory members are often the first to be invited.

We
legitimise
and enhance
each other's
practice

“

Even if we have never worked together, if we're both in the Design Factory Global Network, we have a general understanding of what we're trying to do. So it speeds up the ideation process. And when you're working internationally, that helps. So for us, it is a way of connecting internationally with other institutions to do these challenges efficiently.

This applies not only to education and development projects, but also to research, where sharing methods and results internally helps new approaches take root faster.

Design Factories also serve their institutions as experimental spaces. Several representatives note that interdisciplinary or international collaborations piloted within the Design Factory are later scaled up elsewhere in their universities. The Design Factory provides a protected space to try new ways of working—even when the eventual impact is still uncertain.

Working towards impact

Many collaborations lead to lasting outcomes. Representatives share examples of global courses developed between four Design Factories, and student visits sparked

by casual “Wouldn’t it be amazing if...” conversations over coffee. Another such project for an industry partner eventually involved nine Design Factories across multiple continents. This Design Factory mindset that some describe as a “Yes, and...” attitude enables small ideas to grow into large, unexpected initiatives. Many more course collaborations are celebrated by our members, including with Design Factories that are no longer part of the network.

“

Almost everything I do today at some point was a seed in an International Design Factory Week that then grew into smaller and larger projects and collaborations.

Other projects focus on staff development, often informed by acute needs, on a “project-by-project basis”. Two Design Factories working on similar local government themes decided to team up after discovering their shared focus. Small groups of Design Factories also collaborate on coaching practices, resulting in communities of practice, official training modules for industry partners, and continued collaboration on related topics. These collaborations are often described as “organic, without needing to do much elbow-pushing.”

Finally, representatives shared that joint coursework and student or staff exchanges increases their capacity to work with industry partners. Some Design Factories report being able to take on challenges they couldn’t have handled alone, thanks to these cross-network collaborations.

We
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and
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opportunities
for students

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One of the core mantras across Design Factories is that “students come first.” Representatives describe how the network helps bring this mantra to life by sharing course formats that have been tried, tested, and iterated over the years. As a result, our members report that local curricula become more “palatable and applied for the students,” which leads to “higher student quality, performance, and engagement.” One representative shares that their own teaching practice and philosophy have been transformed since joining the network – something they are now paying forward at their home institution.

Connecting students

International collaboration is often used as a way to attract students, and representatives point to examples where student teams are coached by international staff from other Design Factories. The cultural exchange that results offers valuable learning moments for both students and staff, as participants encounter different ways of interpreting, understanding, and engaging with content. Some also highlight the network’s longer-term value for students’ careers. Representatives describe how students remain connected to the network over time, with some returning as interns, coaches, or even staff, sometimes at a different Design Factory from where they began.

Representatives describe a wide range of opportunities for students to connect across the network. One frequently mentioned example is the Product Development Project course, which runs in multiple Design Factories and culminates in public Galas where students showcase their work. Students are able to visit other Design Factories, see each other’s projects, and build connections with peers.

Others describe more informal opportunities. For instance, if a Design Factory is missing expertise for a project, they may invite a student from another Design Factory to contribute. In this way, student

We
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practice



mobility also becomes a form of peer-to-peer support.

Shorter formats like the 'RatRelay' and 'JAM Week' hackathons are also noted as popular among students. These events allow for collaboration across time zones and cultures, and in some cases are adapted locally to ease coordination. Several representatives point out that these international collaborations allow Design Factories to attract larger industry partners; opportunities that would be harder to secure individually but resonate strongly with students.

Student participation in the annual International Design Factory Week is also encouraged. Students from the host Design Factory often engage with visitors directly, while our members enjoy that students from elsewhere can participate by submitting and presenting their work at the UnBoxed conference.

Exchanging students

Beyond projects and events, the network also enables more formal exchange. Popular courses such as 'Challenge Based Innovation' and the 'Product Development Project' are run by multiple Design Factories. While some follow the full original format, others adapt these courses to local contexts while still including student exchange components. In addition,

smaller "blended intensive programs" take place several times a year, often with open invitations that attract students from across the network.

Representatives note that the Design Factory Global Network serves as a "gateway" for students seeking international placements or internships. When a Design Factory proposes a student exchange or internship, it is almost always positively received, thanks to the trust between members. Compared to building exchanges from scratch, this reduces administrative burden and accelerates the process. From a university perspective, the student exchanges where "Design Factories act as a bridge between universities" are also a key advantage of the network. Several representatives also describe how students feel more at ease when arriving at a new Design Factory, since the environment feels familiar and welcoming.

“

I hear time and time again from the students how impactful these exchange experiences are - how different and meaningful they are compared to what other experiences they have through their college life.

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Representatives frequently exchange experiences on how to “keep funding flowing, coming in, and growing.” These conversations help members navigate changing circumstances while also opening up new ways to thrive. In addition to sharing strategies, representatives invite each other to join joint funding applications, frequently across borders and sometimes even continents. When one Design Factory applies for funding that requires international collaboration, inviting another Design Factory is described as a “no-brainer.” Many highlight this as one of the key institutional benefits of being in the network.

Getting funding

Several representatives described successful joint funding efforts that emerge almost serendipitously. In one case, Design Factories from two countries connected during the International Design Factory Week and discovered a strong alignment in their research interests. Soon after returning home, one received a funding call targeting collaboration between their two countries: “So we thought, okay, wonderful!” The annual event is regularly mentioned as a catalyst for developing proposals, some of which later receive funding. Additionally, representatives gain access to funding sources they would not have reached without a partner Design Factory located in another specific country.

These success stories are often used to communicate the value of the network to stakeholders within our universities. Representatives describe how funded collaborations have served as “arguments towards high-level management” to justify participation in international gatherings and increased cross-unit collaboration. One representative explains how this credibility also opened new doors internally:

We
legitimise
and enhance
each other's
practice

“

We got this project funded with several other Design Factories, which also connects to other units in our university. We invited them a few weeks ago, and they were surprised they were invited to contribute to our program and the design of the activities. So we explained that connecting us all has always been our intention, and they are now formally a part of what we do.

Sharing research

Since many Design Factories are embedded in academic institutions, representatives see research as an important part of the network's collective identity. Research collaborations tend to emerge organically—most often between members who share specific interests or have complementary datasets. Many focus on pedagogy and student experience, while others explore broader topics such as sustainability, design methodologies, or organisational change. Several representatives expressed a desire to grow the network's research engagement further and suggested that certain themes could be explored more deeply together.

The network also supports rapid dissemination of insights. The

UnBoxed conference, held during the International Design Factory Week, is frequently mentioned as a key venue for this. Representatives appreciate that both academic research and pedagogical practices are shared in this space, contributing to a collective understanding of what works and where opportunities for development lie.

Some highlight recent progress in strengthening the research culture across the network—especially valuable for Design Factories that are newer to academic research. Several representatives mentioned that being able to publish in a special journal issue helps demonstrate tangible value to their universities while also providing additional evidence of why our teaching methods, employed in multiple locations worldwide, yield benefits. Others described the benefit of sharing local research, for example, on circular economy or regenerative design, that others in the network can apply or adapt in their own contexts.

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We want to keep piloting and experimenting with new methodologies, courses, and interactions. Collaborating with other universities gives us the space and funding to do so. So we've been leveraging the network more in terms of applying for projects together. And one of the reasons we won the funding for a joint application was because the Design Factory Global Network is a great platform for dissemination.

We
collaborate
and
experiment

We provide
opportunities
for students

We
create
funding and
research
applications



We
legitimise
and enhance
each other's
practice

Representatives often describe their Design Factory as a space for doing things differently. This difference, while valuable, sometimes requires explanation or justification within our home institutions. Becoming part of the network helps to legitimise local work, as it situates a Design Factory within a broader, international community. Members note that the network is not just a brand—it builds credibility by showing that this way of teaching and working is already producing results elsewhere.

“

I know what I'm doing is good. Sometimes, however, just me saying it's good is not enough for the university. Now I can say, 'Well, five other universities have done similar things or found similar things.' Immediately, this lends serious credibility to what you're saying or what you're trying to do. You're no longer the crazy innovation person in a corner of the university - you're a global network, and our global achievements make it difficult to argue against us.

In this way, the network amplifies not only visibility but also confidence. Several representatives note that their pedagogical thinking continues to evolve not only through local experiences, but also through international exchanges within the network. Sharing practices with peers helps refine methods and strengthens the rationale for doing things differently.

Some members point to the strategic use of published reports to make the network's presence more visible to our institutions. One representative shared that they upload these to their website and leave printed copies near management offices. These reports become tools for storytelling, not only for internal stakeholders but also for students and visitors who may ask about the Design Factory.

Building institutional engagement is also done by hosting the annual International Design Factory Week. Because hosting rotates, more institutions are exposed over time to the broader network and its members. Representatives also highlight the World Design Factory Day as a virtual event that lowers the threshold for managers and university staff to engage with the network through presentations, discussions, and workshops. This public event allows broader audiences to see the diversity and reach of the community, and can spark unexpected connections.

“

I'm quite amazed that my superiors told me this week that they will visit another Design Factory now. They asked me whether there was anything they could do there that would support us. It's interesting that top management is now starting to help facilitate Design Factory collaborations.



Drivers *supporting our members*

Our members identified several norms and practices that drive us. First, we are committed to investing in one another as individuals and as professionals. Second, we draw inspiration from each other and reflect on our practices, keeping us energised and aligned. Finally, our culture of sharing and experimentation accelerates our growth and enables us to evolve as a collective.





We invest in
each other

Building personal
connections

Exploring alignment

Supporting quick and
easy interactions

Building understanding

Benchmarking activities
and common challenges

Testing assumptions and
seeking validation

We
inspire and
benchmark

We evolve
together

Sharing work

Experimenting

Accelerating
development

We invest in each other

Building personal connections

Representatives described how the foundation of any collaboration in the network is knowing who we are working with. Particularly for newcomers, this means understanding what the Design Factory Global Network is and how it operates. Several members said that attending the International Design Factory Week for the first time clarified the purpose of the network. Meeting other members face-to-face helps members understand what other Design Factories are doing and how their own practice connects. Knowing which Design Factories are similar and which are different supports our network members in interpreting each other's messages better. Some representatives noted that there is often a trade-off: whether to send the

same people to deepen relationships, or send new people so they can become familiar with the network and act as ambassadors back home. This is considered important not only for new Design Factories, but also for new representatives at existing ones, as some aspects of the communal spirit are difficult to explain in words.

Besides increasing understanding, the annual week also strengthens members' sense of belonging. By meeting peers, people gain the feeling that they are not alone and that they can count on one another if they face a challenge. Some added that being asked where they think the network should go, for example during workshops or the focus groups that informed this report, makes them feel the network values their perspective. These reflective moments also reinforce the idea that members shape the network together while continuing to develop independently.

Exploring alignment

As people build familiarity, it becomes easier to reach out and exchange experiences. Members regularly contact one another to share questions or suggestions, often finding that another Design Factory has faced a similar situation.

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Learning what each Design Factory is doing supports creating a map of what is happening. This makes it easier to find connections and then propose things that make sense. You can just connect with them if there is a match.

In addition to the annual week, some representatives mentioned the UnBoxed conference as a useful way to foster connection. Because it is shorter, more people can attend, and it provides immediate insight into the work and interests of other Design Factories. Others shared that visiting another Design Factory directly is particularly helpful, since that “brings the stories and the Design Factory Global Network to life.”

“

One-on-one interactions with people in the network shape the way we do things. So, those individual connections with folks in the network are really transformative.

Representatives described the International Design Factory Week as a high-energy moment, “a dopamine hit,” and “a blast for everyone.” The week combines bonding, creative energy, and collaboration opportunities through both structured workshops and informal conversations. People often leave with a list of ideas and connections to follow up on. They emphasised that this energy supports virtual collaboration afterwards.

“

There is something in the atmosphere that works very well. The community is extremely important. All the projects we are undertaking are a result of the personal contacts we established during IDFW. I know what people do; I know what interests them. So, I approach them on specific projects that I’m working on. Therefore, the community value here is significant.

A recurring benefit of working with others in the network is the ease of collaboration. Several representatives noted that they trust people in the network “as if we are part of the same organisation.” Because we already know who to talk to and what values we share, it reduces uncertainty. Design Factory employees are open about the constraints of their institutions, which helps avoid surprises. As a result, collaborations can begin quickly, even when timelines are tight.



Supporting quick and easy interactions

After the annual gathering, conversations continue in smaller ways. Communication tends to be quick and informal, with Slack as the primary channel. Several representatives described how the low barrier to reaching out supports everyday exchange.

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I saw on Slack that there were several activities and online gatherings. Lately, we have been busy with lectures, so we haven't been able to join. At the same time, however, my Slack is always open, and I know that if I have a question for anybody from another Design Factory, and I drop the question in Slack, they are only a click away!

Representatives also mentioned the role of online gatherings, which allow people to stay connected throughout the year without needing to launch a formal project. Some shared examples of students reaching out to the network for research support or internship opportunities—and receiving fast, kind replies. Even when someone is not able to help directly, responses are encouraging and show that the network is present.

An open-door culture is also common. Members welcome visits from others in the network—sometimes planned, sometimes spontaneous. Everybody is happy to host others, share resources, and discuss collaboration options as a way to strengthen the links between the people. Several described these visits as informal chats over coffee or lunch, “as if you're meeting a good friend that you haven't seen for a long time.”

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These are the important things. And it's hard to explain this to anyone else or describe it in words or on a website. Internally in the network, however, it means a lot that you can just show up at someone else's place and bring nothing, yet still get fed and have a meaningful conversation. We give and take. When someone is in need, they'll ask you to come, and they'll give you a nice little meal. At other times, you're in that position and provide a meal for someone else.

Some representatives also described scheduling regular informal check-ins, sometimes based on personal connections, and at other times as a way to explore local funding or coordination opportunities across nearby Design Factories. These interactions, whether casual or strategic, keep the ties between members active and alive.

We inspire and **benchmark**

Building understanding

The Design Factory Global Network provides guidance for all members, whether they are newly established or long-standing. For newcomers, the bootcamp offers a valuable starting point. Representatives describe it as an effective way to get to know people and gain a better understanding of the network's core ways of working. Even when a Design Factory already has running courses or an existing practice, joining the network provides a framework that serves as an “igniter” for developing culture, managing student relationships, and building a community.

This orientation process extends beyond the bootcamp. Representatives regularly reach out to more established Design Factories to “understand their structures and use them as a reference point.” While such outreach is possible at any time, the International Design Factory Week remains a key opportunity to meet others and learn about the different development pathways a Design Factory can take as it matures.

Members also describe how they enjoy exchanging insights into working methods. As one representative shared, the knowledge shared across the network is either “exactly what I’m interested in, or on the fringes of what I’m interested in – and always

quite relevant.” These exchanges offer insight not only into methods and tools but also are a “vehicle into the ecosystem in which the other Design Factories operate.” From each interaction, representatives report gaining a deeper understanding of pedagogy, educational practices, or collaboration models.

The network also enables members to adapt successful approaches to their own contexts—whether it involves redesigning a physical space, forming new partnerships, or supporting interdisciplinary learning. Several representatives perceive learning from others how to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaboration and applying that knowledge within their own institutions as a key benefit of the network.

The International Design Factory Week regularly introduces members to new facilitation techniques such as “warm-up exercises, design sprints, and community-building exercises.” These often yield immediate results and energise members to continue experimenting, even when they encounter resistance in their local setting. The network’s culture of continuous feedback supports this spirit, allowing members to reflect on whether to keep, evolve, or discontinue activities based on shared experience.

Benchmarking activities and common challenges

Established Design Factories engage in several large, long-standing collaborations. Newer and smaller Design Factories often benchmark their activities against those of more established members. Several representatives note that doing so has helped clarify their goals and communicate their value within their home institutions.

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In this large network, there are numerous initiatives. It supports us in not reinventing the wheel but adapting or adjusting tried-and-true concepts to our university. So both from a personal and institutional perspective, it is a fantastic opportunity to learn from and connect with various experiences from around the world.

Benchmarking isn't limited to educational practices. Representatives mention learning from each other in areas like innovation hub development, business model design, and project planning. Even though many of our members are already known for thinking outside the box, the network pushes them to go further.

The International Design Factory Week and the UnBoxed conference are frequently named as key spaces for benchmarking and broadening perspectives. These events give insight into cross-cultural practices, for example, by discussing how Artificial Intelligence is being interpreted and implemented across regions. This comparative lens offers substantial learning that members bring back to their local context.

Smaller and less resourced Design Factories especially value the more focused virtual gatherings throughout the year. These allow for a deeper understanding of specific practices and often spark smaller-scale collaborations. Representatives describe these moments as essential for staying aligned with the network while also managing capacity constraints.

Testing assumptions and seeking validation

Representatives describe the network as a space where we can test ideas, challenge assumptions, and seek validation. This is especially valuable for Design Factories that need to justify their approach or prove impact locally. Meeting peers at the annual gathering or visiting other Design Factories gives them a “sense of confirmation that you’re on the right track.”

More established members describe a similar benefit. When they face shifting priorities or need to redesign spaces for broader audiences, the network offers perspective and direction—“a compass to point to, showing how these things can work.” And very importantly, network members are just a Slack message away.

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Through this network, you have access to check international assumptions and gain real local knowledge. I always get really excited when I want to ask a question about a particular kind of project, student work, or just how something is being experienced in London, New York, or Japan; I have a network that I can ask. In that way, it brings real lived experiences much closer to me. It isn't about having to build that relationship with someone. It's a Slack message to go, 'Hi, how would this fit or how would this work?' And so there's kind of a human side to it that is a real benefit of having the network.

We evolve together

Sharing work

Members of the Design Factory Global Network regularly exchange practicalities ranging from the types of ongoing programs to research projects, course formats, and ways to approach collaboration with various partners. Because many Design Factories face similar questions, such as, 'How might we best recruit students? How might we identify meaningful topics for students? How might we involve professors?' Discussing these topics within the network helps surface solutions and share approaches that work.

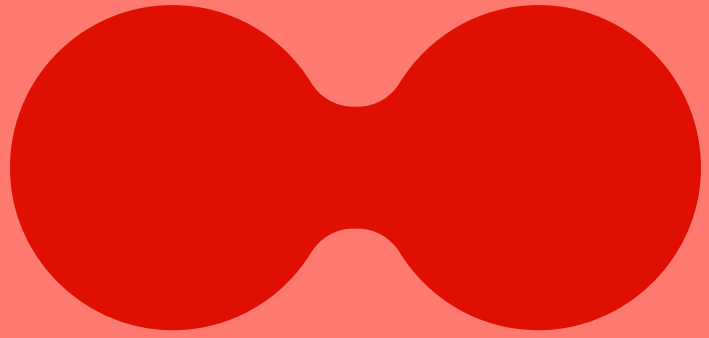
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We identify which Design Factories are most advanced in each topic or each line we are working on, whether it is research, international collaborations, funding applications, or otherwise. Then we keep them as a reference point and work with them.

The network creates active opportunities for this kind of exchange. At the International Design Factory Week, sessions and workshops are dedicated to sharing insights on specific topics. Outside the annual event, members with relevant expertise contribute during online gatherings. Representatives highlight the important role of the coordinating team in prompting organisers and nudging people to stay connected, as the value of these encounters often becomes more clear during or afterwards.

“

It's always inspirational, whether people are tackling new and emerging themes in their work or whether it's a really tangible toolkit. It's a spectrum of what we get back from the network - anything from a great conversation to inspiration to the proverbial shoulder to cry on to really practical and tangible things.



Experimenting

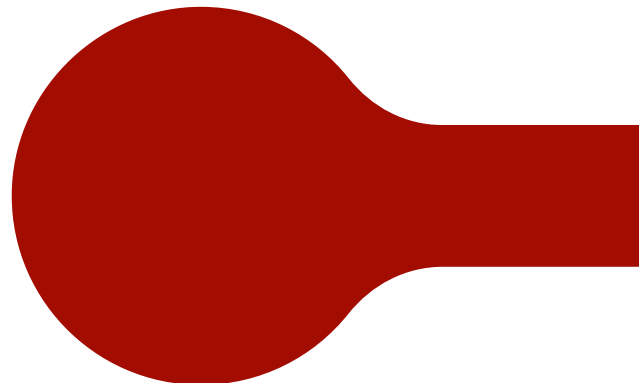
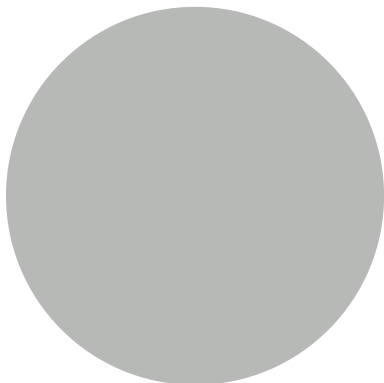
As new Design Factories continue to join, the network evolves. Representatives describe how more established members share what has worked over time, while newcomers bring fresh perspectives and challenge assumptions. One newer member recalled that “many people were coming to us, asking how do you do this, or that?” – creating a space for mutual learning from the start.

The International Design Factory Week reflects this dynamic. Even long-standing exercises generate new insights each year, because the people participating change. Latest additions, such as the UnBoxed conference, have also shifted how members engage, bringing in more researchers and expanding the reach of the gathering.

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We thought big and quite bold! UnBoxed was a significant gathering, and the conversations were amazing. It also brought more people into the International Design Factory Week. Having not just the representatives present but also researchers was a great benefit. The network also connected more with the local university, which showed great potential.

These experiences inspire members to think about who else could take part in the network’s learning processes, such as teachers, coaches, or other roles that might benefit. The focus groups behind this report are also mentioned as a positive experiment, helping to clarify where new ideas might be tested or scaled.





Accelerating development

While any single Design Factory can learn from its own experiments, the network significantly accelerates that learning. Representatives note how best practices and research insights, particularly around courses, student engagement, or skill development, are shared quickly between members.

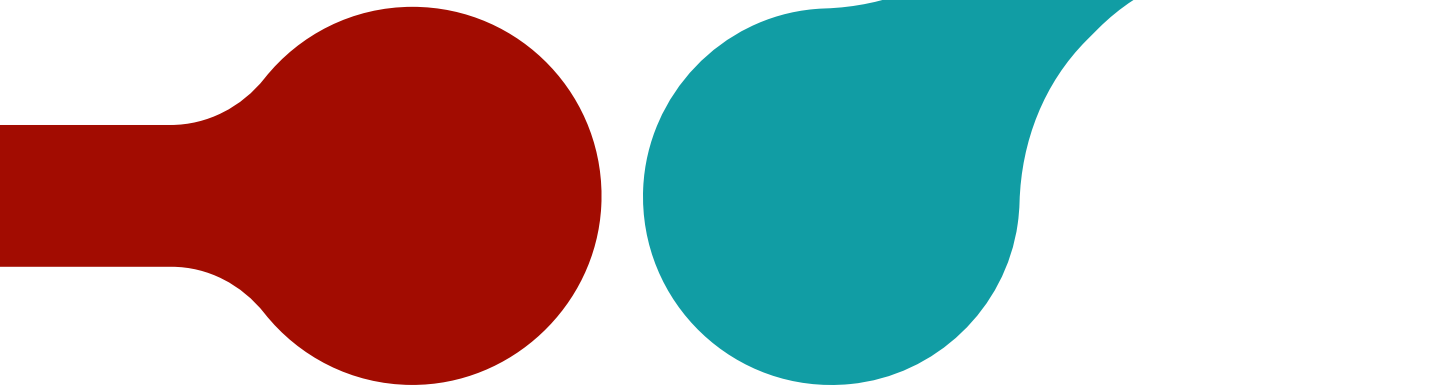
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There are many things that we wouldn't get as a standalone Design Factory. For example, we received guidance from other Design Factories on how to coach and teach our students the first time around. The research done at other institutions also helps us to develop our teaching because it aligns so well with what we are doing.

As Design Factories grow more familiar with the network, they begin to pursue more intentional and strategic collaborations. These deeper relationships support long-term development and growth in the Design Factory's direction of choice.

“

Over the years, we've been capitalising more on the Design Factory Global Network. Initially, we were exploring our purpose and what we wanted to get out of the network. Sometimes it was difficult to justify, but now we have these joint projects for which we wrote funding applications together with other Design Factories. And we are investing more in our internal research and leveraging the network's research. We are benefiting more from the network than in the beginning - not only from understanding what it is, but getting a benefit for our development and our continuation in the future.



A group of people are gathered outdoors, possibly at a conference or event. In the foreground, a man with a beard and a plaid shirt is looking down at a small object in his hand. He is wearing a lanyard with a badge around his neck. Behind him, a woman is looking at her phone, and another man is eating. The background shows trees and a bright yellow circular graphic on the right side of the image.

Going forward

The Design Factory Global Network continues to evolve as members explore new ways to strengthen both individual and collective practice. Representatives describe three promising areas they are currently excited to explore further: strengthening regional collaborations, increasing impact and sustainability, and showcasing talent and expertise.



New practices *emerging from the network*



We strengthen regional collaborations

Although the International Design Factory week and global spread of the network is highly valued, growing numbers have brought new opportunities for added region-specific collaboration within the network.

Some regional communities of practice, or 'chapters', have already formed organically, and their early experiences have been very positive. These regional check-ins are seen as complementary, not a replacement for the global annual gathering. Still, they enhance representation: Design Factories unable to attend the annual week have their perspectives included through delegates from their regional communities.

Beyond improving access and representation, regional communities allow members to become more familiar with each other's daily operations, challenges, and opportunities. This leads to faster identification of collaboration options. While not all Design Factories are geographically close, physical proximity is not essential; simply being in a similar time zone enables regular virtual meetings, making it easier for staff to co-develop projects and for students to connect and share feedback with one another.



We increase our impact and sustainability

The network and its members are always on the lookout to increase impact and sustainability. Two frequent approaches seen in the focus groups were broadening home institution involvement and stronger ties to entrepreneurship efforts.

Experiencing the Design Factory approach first-hand is often more effective than trying to explain it - once colleagues see its value, they are more likely to become allies and advocates. This increased internal legitimacy strengthens institutional support and embeds our ways of working and teaching more deeply within the broader culture. For example, involving more professors, researchers, teachers, and other staff in events like the UnBoxed conference is a way to expand our internal reach.

On the other hand, several members had strengthened ties to incubators or created their own startup programs. This integration motivates students to participate through the promise of startup funding, reducing the emphasis on academic credits as the core motivation. Stronger entrepreneurial links also attract greater involvement from industry partners. In turn, this raises the level of accountability and helps establish long-term collaborations, both locally and across the global network.



We showcase our talent and expertise

A third opportunity emerging across the network is the underused potential of the immense talent and experience within individual Design Factories. Many members have developed expertise in specific domains, such as Artificial Intelligence, ageing in place, regenerative design, or female entrepreneurship.

To better leverage this collective expertise, different types of local and shared peer learning efforts are taking place to increase awareness on who is working on what.

On a network level, one of the initiatives to increase peer learning has been monthly online gatherings, where Design Factories have begun sharing experiences on topics such as funding and student mobility. Many representatives appreciate this initiative, even those unable to attend, because it creates valuable opportunities to connect, learn, and explore shared challenges. Many also believe these gatherings can evolve into even more impactful and strategic forms of engagement across the network.

Afterword



Together, we represent and shape the Design Factory Global Network – again and again and again

The Design Factory Global Network is not a finished product. It is something we grow, nurture and reimagine together. As this report shows, the value of the network lies not in its structures, but in our values, in how we invest in one another, challenge each other to think differently, and make space for bold experimentation. What makes the network strong is not only its diversity of people and practices, but the shared belief that learning and collaboration can, and should, evolve.

Indeed, this report does not describe a top-down strategy or a centrally created vision. It is created from the voices of our members, from their reflections on their experiences and hopes. The insights gathered in these focus groups do not just describe the network; they express what the network is, how it is felt, and how it is continually shaped. Listening to each other, making sense together, and acting on what emerges is not only how this report was created, but how the network works at its best.

What we heard is not just an appreciation of what the network offers now, but a desire and commitment to do more and to do

it better. There is excitement about growing regional connections, a desire to make our impact visible and lasting, and a recognition that we must always keep finding new ways to support each other. These ambitions are not instructions – they are already being explored and tested in various Design Factories.

This report does not offer a blueprint. Instead, it captures a snapshot of how our members experience the network today and points to possibilities for what comes next. It invites all of us – long-standing members, newcomers, and readers who notice a resonance with these goals and ways of working, alike – to ask: What role do we want to play in shaping the future of this community? What do we want to grow more of? What needs rethinking? And how can we make the invisible work of collaboration more visible, valued and sustainable?

We do not yet know exactly what the network will look like in five or ten years. But if there is one thing these conversations have made clear, it is this: we are always ready to listen, to learn and to build it together.

**Floris van der Marel,
Klaus Castrén, and
The DFGN team**

