

Living Territories and Participation: Exploring Pathways to Regeneration

By Arthur Braga

In June, I took to Participatory Design Conference - PDC 2026 in Milan a workshop I had been shaping for a while: The Living Territory: Participatory Design as an Ecology of Regeneration. It came out of a question that keeps returning in my work: what happens when we stop treating territory as a backdrop and start seeing it as something alive, made of relations between ecology, institutions, everyday life, and more-than-human beings?

I built the workshop around a fictional coastal place called Maré Alta Bay. It had a seafront, lagoons, wetlands, a port, tourism pressure, and a local community trying to live through all of that. I wasn't interested in giving participants a problem with a correct answer. What I wanted was to create a situation where they could sit with the tensions already there and ask what participatory design can actually do when a territory is under pressure. Working in small groups, participants moved through scenario materials and actor profiles, mapping out the relationships, fragilities, and conflicts they saw in the bay. From there, each group built what I called a Map of Living Principles: a way of laying out, together, the ethical ground they were standing on, the process they imagined putting in motion, and the kind of future they were reaching for.

What happened in the room was less about solving and more about shifting perspective. The discussions kept pulling away from an anthropocentric reading of territory. Participants returned again and again to ideas like interdependence, reciprocity, and coexistence. More-than-human life was not treated as scenery. It became part of the conversation about whose futures count, whose needs are noticed, and what kind of responsibility participation might carry.

One of the things that stayed with me most was the attention given to children and schools. In one group, children were imagined as possible mediators of ecological care, helping communities relate differently to fragile environments through direct experience and shared attention. Other proposals moved toward citizen science, storytelling around ancestral knowledge, and community gatherings as ways of building a stronger public relationship with place. That felt important. Participation was no longer framed as consultation alone, but as a way of learning, sensing, and caring together.

By the end, the groups had produced a set of system maps and living-principles maps that made this shift visible on paper — concrete traces of how differently a room of people can imagine a territory once they stop assuming it is theirs to manage. The feedback was very good overall, especially around the embodied parts of the workshop and the questions it opened up. At the same time, one limitation became obvious: some of the written material asked for more reading than the moment could really hold. The timing did not help either, since the session took place in the final slot of the last conference day, after a long and heavy week. Even so, that tension was useful. It showed me quite clearly where the framework still needs work.

What the workshop gave me was not a finished model, and I think that is fine. It gave me a clearer sense of direction, and a first set of concrete tools — the scenario, the actor profiles, the living-principles maps — that I can now refine and carry into future sessions. Participatory design can offer something important when we are trying to read and reimagine territories as living, disputed, uneven systems. Not because it delivers clean answers, but because it creates the conditions to ask better questions, to notice what is usually left out, and to imagine forms of action that begin with relation rather than control. That is what I want to keep working on now.