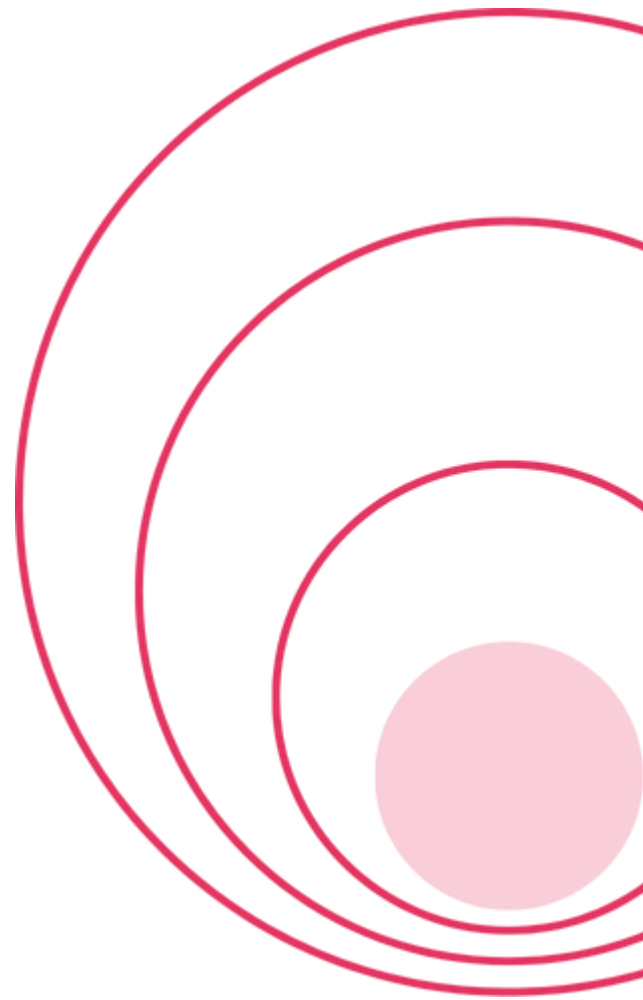ORDER ONE:

# SYMBOLS OF PEACE: REIMAGINING PEACE THROUGH INCLUSIVE DESIGN

*Chetna Chauhan*

# CHETNA
## CHAUHAN



**Chetna Chauhan is a designer from Delhi, India, currently pursuing an MFA in Design for Sustainability at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). Grounded in lived experiences from working with underserved communities in India, their design practice is shaped by empathy, systems thinking, and a commitment to social and emotional justice. With a background in visual communication and creative direction, Chetna approaches design not just as a tool of communication, but as a way to challenge extractive systems and restore dignity where it has long been denied. Chetna aims to focus on conflict-affected and historically marginalized spaces, exploring how participatory design, peace studies, and cultural symbolism can support healing, resilience, and community-led futures. For them, design is a political and emotional act a way to reimagine relationships, repair harm, and hold space for collective hope.**

# ABSTRACT

This paper argues that design, especially the symbols we use, can significantly influence our perceptions and meanings. By situating the research in Johan Galtung's Peace model, we further explore how these symbols can be used to redefine and reimagine the idea of peace and conflict resolution. It examines how elements such as visual storytelling, language, and metaphors can either support or hinder peace efforts. We develop a holistic idea of peace where we are not only talking about stopping violence but focusing on creating a just and equitable culture, which ties back to Johan Galtung's concept of Positive Peace. Additionally, it incorporates John Paul Lederach's concept of 'moral imagination' and Elise Boulding's perspective on peace as an everyday experience. It argues for how design can help us imagine new possibilities and bring peace into our daily lives through symbols and rituals. It discusses the importance of designing with communities, as Ezio Manzini suggests, highlighting tools such as empathy maps, visual stories, and community-created symbols that can aid in healing. Ultimately, it introduces a special empathy mapping tool designed for communities recovering from conflict, aiming to help people express their feelings and share their stories, thereby turning communication into a unified and respectful conversation about peace.

**Keywords:** *Symbolic Design, Peacebuilding, Conflict Resolution, Participatory Design*

# SYMBOLS OF PEACE: REIMAGINING PEACE THROUGH INCLUSIVE DESIGN

## *I. Introduction: The Politics of Symbolic Design*

Design is not neutral, it helps shape perceptions, memory, and create meaning. Things we design end up designing the world around us. Design isn't just about function, it shapes our reality. The reality we live in is a mix of our socio-economic background and experiences but these experiences are heavily influenced by design. The implications of this extend far beyond everyday objects, it reaches into the very fabric of our social understanding. Given this inherent and pervasive power, it's crucial to examine how design intervenes in our collective consciousness in areas of societal impact and its role in shaping perceptions of complex human experiences. As Stuart Hall's foundational work illustrates, meaning is not inherent in things [1], but is constructed through language, images, and other symbolic systems. Representation, therefore, is not simply a reflection of reality, but an active process of making sense of the world. Hall consistently linked representation to power stating those with influence often control the dominant forms of representation, shaping public understanding ultimately reinforcing certain ideologies. Given this power of design, it is crucial to interrogate how design contributes to collective meaning-making around complex human experiences, especially in a world marked by increasing conflict, trauma, and inequality. It is precisely within this critical context that this paper explores how design communication profoundly shapes the understanding of peace and conflict. This underscores the vital importance of examining visual storytelling and language in post-conflict work.

To systematically analyze the role of design in conflict work, this paper will draw upon Richard Buchanan's Four Orders of Design. The core thesis of this paper is that design, when used with ethical sensitivity and cultural awareness, can reshape how we understand peace, conflict, and dignity through symbolic forms of communication. We will briefly mention all four of Buchanan's Orders, then spotlight Order 1, exploring how symbols (language, visuals, metaphors) can support or damage peace.

## *II. Redefining Peace Through Symbolic Design*

In times of global instability, increasing complexities with intersecting conflicts, our traditional definition of peace falls short to find solutions that truly serve all. Which is why there is a need to redefine our idea of peace and embrace a more holistic perspective. Johan Galtung's concept of Positive Peace and Negative Peace has laid a foundational framework re-defining peace reimagining peace in this broader, more inclusive way.
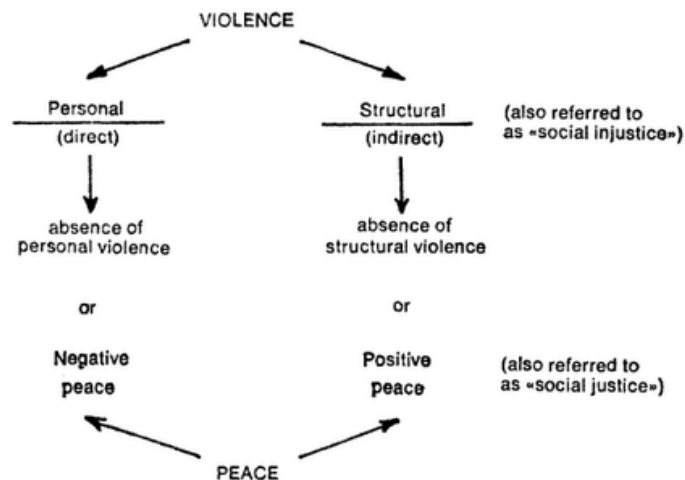


*Figure 1: The extended concepts of violence and peace*
*(Source: Galtung 1969)*

Galtung defines peace as not just the mere absence of war but also an unequivocal need for an equitable and just society[2]. His work emphasizes that the presence of justice and social equity is what will lead us to achieve sustainable peace solutions. (Peace by Peaceful Means, 1996). In direct violence in forms of structural or cultural violence exists and is often used to implicit power structure and continue oppression. Therefore, to solve for peace, we must work on these structures and the culture of oppression that persists with them. He also states that "Peace is the integration of human society." Hence, designing for peace is not just about neutrality or silence but about creating conditions where dignity, justice, and emotional healing are present.

Peace is not a passive or neutral condition but rather something intentionally constructed through systems, relationships, and communication. Symbols and stories are integral to this integration process, as they carry meaning that can either support or undermine peace.

John Paul Lederach offers a deeply human approach to peacebuilding, arguing thatsustainable peace requires the ability to imagine relationships beyond violence[3]. His concept of moral imagination is about envisioning new possibilities in deeply divided contexts. This serves as an invitation to designers. Design is not just fixing problems; it goes far beyond to help people imagine and experience different futures. Lederach's use of metaphor and storytelling aligns seamlessly with symbolic design, legitimizing the use of tools such as visual storytelling, empathy mapping, and community symbols as integral parts of conflict transformation. The key idea here is that peace is envisioned, communicated, and made real through collective ideas and actions. Similarly, Elise Boulding speaks of peace as a lived culture, not merely a treaty, but a way of being. She emphasizes that peace is maintained through rituals, stories, art, and symbols that reinforce cooperation and mutual respect[4]. This supports the idea that everyday design visuals, metaphors, community events, and participatory storytelling can shape peaceful identities and shared memories. Her work reinforces that design is not just a technical tool but a cultural practice that can help create environments of care and resilience. This justifies the inclusion of community-led art, memory spaces, and symbolic healing practices as legitimate components of peace design.

### III. Tools of Symbolic Healing

Interdisciplinary design has emerged as a critical approach to addressing complex societal issues, including peacebuilding. It helps us integrate diverse fields such as sociology, psychology, and design to create innovative solutions that resonate with the needs and experiences of affected communities.

The Critical need for interdisciplinary approaches in design, particularly in addressing complex social issues like peace and conflict resolution, was first highlighted by Richard Buchannan in his work on "Wicked Problem"[5] . He argued that design is inherently a problem-solving discipline that must engage with various fields, such as sociology, psychology, and systems thinking, to develop comprehensive solutions for complex and challenging problems. To do so, we can use various design tools that help designers centre their work to their core audience and their mindsets. One of them is the Empathy Map[6], a tool used in design thinking and user experience (UX) design, initially created by Dave Grey to help probe specific questions and understand how users feel, act, and what influences their decisions.
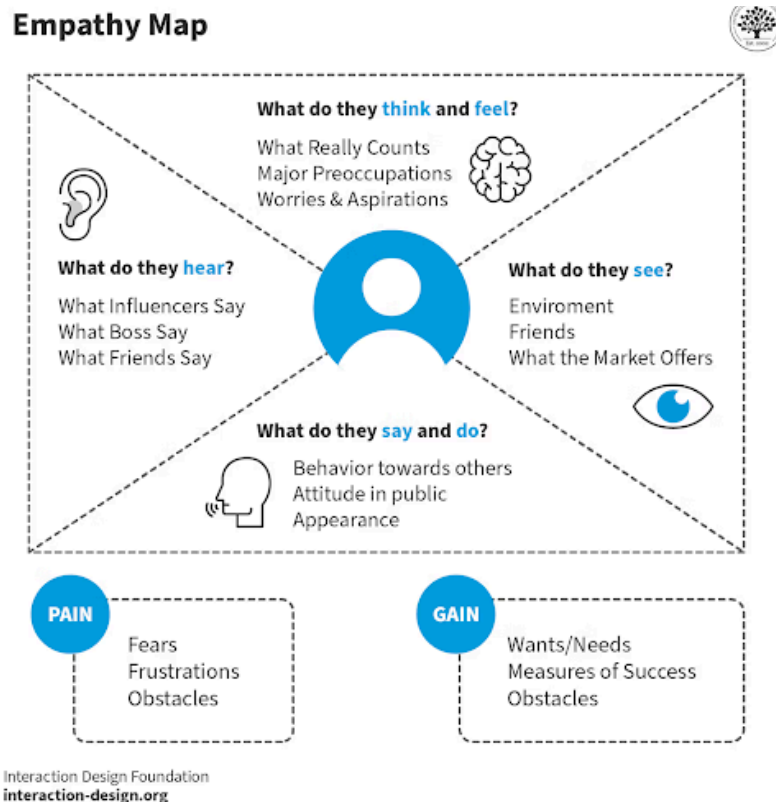


**Figure 2: Empathy Map**
**(Interaction Design Foundation)**

To surface unseen narratives, particularly in environments where open expression might be emotionally difficult or socially dangerous. This tool enables the emergence of non-verbal, emotional, and cultural insights. Additionally, we can utilize methods of Visual Storytelling (as employed in Participatory Research) and Symbols to gain a deeper understanding of the people we are working with.

We frame these tools using Ezio Manzini's concept of 'designing with,' rather than 'designing for,' from his work 'Design When Everybody Designs'. Manzini emphasizes that communities possess deep reservoirs of knowledge and symbolic meaning, and participatory design helps externalize this. These tools return agency to participants, especially when the goal is not a product but shared understanding or healing.

*Examples of community-generated symbols as evidence that symbolic design can be created with people, not just for them, include:*

- **Murals that narrate resistance or resilience**
- **Storytelling circles or visual maps where people reconstruct memory together**
- **Protest art that communicates trauma, dignity, and political intent simultaneously**

We can specifically reference the Life & Peace Institute's work in Somalia as a key case study. They utilized co-created visual maps and drawings in their Participatory Action Research (PAR) process to help communities discuss violence and imagine peace[7]. These drawings became tools for reconciliation, not just illustrations.

The District Six Museum centres on lived memory and resistance through objects, walls of names, and stories—curated in collaboration with former residents to preserve a history erased by apartheid violence[8].

*Figure 3: District Six Museum*



*Figure 4: District Six Museum*

The Kigali Genocide Memorial uses imagery, ritual, and space to construct a narrative of shared mourning, public education, and intergenerational warning—making violence visible while creating a space for grief and transformation. This space serves as the final resting-place for 250,000 victims of the Genocide against the Tutsi. It is also a driver in Rwanda's extraordinary journey towards healing and reconciliation[9].



*Figure 5: District Six Museum*

The Jallianwala Bagh Memorial in Amritsar, India, is another symbolic site of collective trauma and historical resistance. It commemorates the 1919 massacre of unarmed Indian civilians by British colonial forces a pivotal event in India's anti-colonial struggle. The preserved bullet marks on walls, the martyr's well, and the layout of the garden function as physical symbols of historical violence. Though its spatial design has been contested in recent years for being overly aestheticized, the site itself remains a powerful reminder of how memory, architecture, and public symbolism shape historical consciousness and national identity.



*Figure 6: Preserved bullets shots Marked on the walls of Jallianwala Bagh*

This emphasis on the role of design in preserving historical memory helps us feel connected to the past and its impact on the present.

Returning to Elise Boulding, she writes that peace is sustained through symbolic systems—songs, artefacts, and rituals that shape memory and values over time. This supports the idea that design can intentionally craft these systems as part of long-term peacebuilding. This section will argue that symbolic design is not aesthetic decoration; it is cultural infrastructure.

## IV. A Community-Centered Empathy Mapping Tool

Studying the Empathy Map tool in line with the need for participatory tools that support symbolic healing, we developed a customized empathy mapping tool designed specifically for use in community-centered, post-conflict environments. Unlike conventional empathy maps used in product design or UX contexts, this tool was adapted to:

- Facilitate emotional expression where verbalization may be difficult or unsafe
- Honour cultural nuance and symbolic language
- Encourage shared authorship of emotional and social realities



*Figure 7: Community-Centered Empathy Mapping Tool*

Inspired by Manzini's concept of "designing with" and Lederach's emphasis on moral imagination, this tool invites participants to contribute experiences not only as individuals but as members of a collective memory system.[10][11] Participants are guided through visual, metaphorical, and storytelling-based prompts that help surface unspoken narratives such as fear, pride, silence, resilience, and grief without relying solely on words.

It is designed to be co-created and co-owned, allowing communities to revise its structure based on their own expressions of meaning. Language within the map has been intentionally shifted from extractive framing, such as "gains" and "pains", to terms that reflect dignity, agency, and emotional truth. The process allows communities not only to document but to shape the structure of the tool itself, ensuring it reflects their cultural meanings and healing practices. Grounded in participatory design thinking and human capabilities theory, this map becomes both a research method and a space for dialogue, an artefact that bridges memory, design, and the pursuit of peace.

## V. Conclusion: Symbols as Seeds of Peace

Symbolic design plays a critical role in shaping how communities remember, heal, and imagine peace. It holds the potential to transform communication from a detached monologue into a meaningful, collective dialogue. When practiced with cultural awareness and ethical sensitivity, symbolic communication can open space for reconciliation, restore dignity, and disrupt dominant narratives that often erase or simplify lived experiences of conflict.

This paper has argued that design must be understood not only as a tool for function or communication, but as a cultural and emotional infrastructure, a system of meaning-making that can either uphold systems of oppression or seed alternatives. Through the lens of Buchanan's Order 1, and grounded in the philosophies of Galtung, Lederach, and Boulding, symbolic design emerges as a strategy for justice, memory, and hope.

In this context, the development of my own community-centered empathy mapping tool reflects an attempt to move beyond critique and into practice. Designed specifically for post-conflict and emotionally sensitive environments, the tool invites participants to surface unspoken experiences, co-author narratives, and reclaim agency in how their realities are represented. It aims not to extract insight, but to build understanding and trust bridging symbolic communication with emotional depth and participatory ethics.

Ultimately, this work calls on designers to step into their roles as careful listeners, critical storytellers, and ethical co-creators. To design for peace is to design for the unseen, the unspoken, and the unresolved —holding space not only for what has happened, but for what still can be imagined.

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