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Roxane Andrès is a French designer and researcher. Holding a PhD in Design (Jean Monnet University – Saint-Étienne), she is an associate researcher at the CRD ENS Paris-Saclay / ENSCI and teaches at ESAA La Martinière-Diderot (Lyon), where she coordinates the DSAA-Master programme in Textile, Territories, and Transformations.

Her practice explores the connections between matter, colour, and narratives, with a particular focus on sensitive contexts : care, ageing, funerary practices, and social vulnerabilities. She develops a situated approach to design, combining surveys, material and social experimentations, and participatory methods. Creative-inquiry plays a central role in her work, serving as a tool for attention and co-experience that brings forth narratives and forms of design rooted in lived experience.

Her research unfolds around three main axes: care and vulnerabilities, organic imaginaries, and the agency of colour. She is particularly interested in natural dyes, the bioclimatic transformations of textiles, and the ways in which materials can become vectors of relationships, memory, and collective transformation.

Committed to education and knowledge-sharing, she contributes to pedagogical programmes, public events, and collaborative research projects, working with cultural, scientific, and associative institutions. Through publications, conferences, and experiments, her work examines the role of design in sensitive environments and its capacity to support the transformation of social practices and imaginaries.

Caring for Ageing : A Research-Creation Journey (2016–2023)

Roxane Andrès

Abstract :

This article traces a research-creation journey exploring the singularities of ageing through the lens of design, empathy, and participatory practices. Inspired by Félix Guattari’s concept of a “design of singularities,” the author questions the limitations of universal design paradigms, which often fail to account for the diversity of individual experiences—sometimes even creating exclusion or danger. Through four successive projects (2016–2023), including colour surveys, social experiments, and participatory studies in care homes, the research reveals how design can move beyond standardisation. By engaging with residents, caregivers, and local communities, the projects highlight the importance of sensory experience, intergenerational spaces, and habitability in redefining care homes as living, inclusive environments. The article argues for a design approach rooted in fieldwork, listening, and collective creation, ultimately proposing a shift from medicalised care to a broader, empathy-driven vision of ageing that values dignity, comfort, and social connection.

Keywords :

Ageing , Old age, Participatory design, Sensory experience , Care home habitability, Intergenerational spaces, Singularity in design,

Empathy-driven design , Solidarity, Social inclusion , Dignity, Research , Creation, Comfort

Introduction

In 2017, I published an article in *Sciences du Design* titled *From the Universal to the Singular : Caring for Ageing*. I drew on Félix Guattari's (1991) concept of a "design of singularities," in contrast to the recurring paradigm of so-called "universal design," often invoked in medical and social fields. A personal experience had struck me: observing a tactile paving system designed to guide visually impaired individuals, I witnessed a scene where an elderly woman, dragging her feet slightly, caught her cane in the strips and fell. This device, conceived in the name of accessibility, proved dangerous in her case. That day, I understood that the universal, far from including, could exclude and endanger. Since then, I have explored the following question: how can we practice a design of singularities, not in the abstraction of a manual of best practices, but through experience, listening, and fieldwork?

Between 2016 and 2023, four successive projects—surveys, social experiments, participatory studies—allowed me to explore these issues in various contexts. Each project, in its own way, informed the next.

Act 1 – A Colourful Survey on the Perception of Old Age (2017)

The first project was a survey conducted during the 2017 Saint-Étienne International Design Biennale as part of the "Ageing Well"

Living Lab. The setup invited participants of all ages to express their perception of old age through colour choices. Children spoke of grey and sepia, sad colours; those in their thirties evoked intimate, tender memories through nostalgic hues (wisteria, mimosa, cornflower); fifty- and sixty-year-olds expressed a desire for joyful, vibrant existence, as if to ward off old age (madder, papaya, pistachio); the oldest participants claimed deep, vibrant tones (indigo, purple, ruby). A striking moment came from an 86-year-old woman who refused to participate, saying : *"Since I became old, no one ever asks for my opinion. Besides, your palette is missing a colour—it's missing transparent."* This quiet yet decisive act of non-participation showed that design must open itself to all forms of expression, even those that escape the intended framework. This colour survey convinced me that old age does not exist as a uniform category ("seniors"): it is traversed by singular, subjective perceptions, which design must reveal.





Act 2 – The Discreet Valet (2016)

In the same context, I designed *The Discreet Valet*, a chimerical piece of furniture blending domestic and medical elements: a cane, a grab bar, a mirror, and small intimate drawers. Through this piece, I explored the notion of grafting: borrowing from the familiar to preserve the continuity of “home” even within an institution. This reflection continued in workshops bringing together caregivers, gerontologists, institutions, and designers. All worked from the principle of grafting: how to support the transition from home to care home without abrupt rupture, how to maintain tangible landmarks of life and identity.

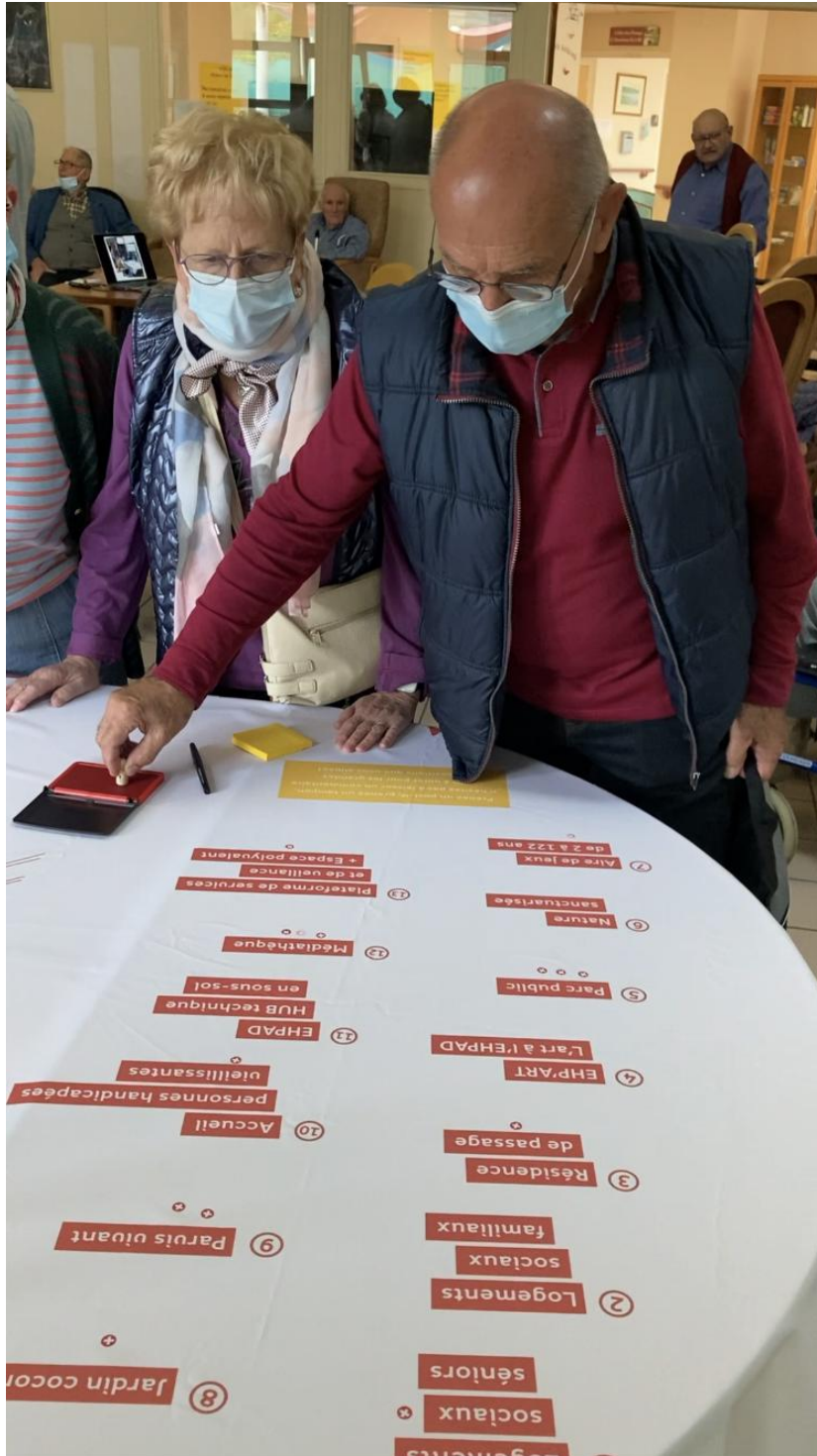


Act 3 – Study on the Transformation of Care Homes (2023–2024)

In 2023, this exploration took on new dimensions with a participatory study conducted with the collective *Activer les solidarités*. Over eight months, we worked on the habitability of care homes. The survey unfolded in several stages: immersion residencies, local outreach, interviews and sensitive portraits, opening up to the public orbiting these facilities, and 10 participatory workshops on themes such as shared spaces, the experience of “home,” outdoor spaces, new visions of care, the role of the medical, orientation, and landmarks. The methodology was rooted in empathy: role-playing, sensory experiences enabling caregivers and visitors to project themselves into the residents’ shoes. These collective experiences highlighted the importance of care homes as intergenerational spaces, as living third places—not isolated in a medical function, but connected to their neighbourhoods, residents, and local services—a re-evaluation of shared and intimate spaces.

In 2023, this reflection continued with a project led jointly by the CNSA and the Mobilier National (with designer Yohann Jacquon), focused on medication distribution in care homes. The trolley, a logistical and medical object, epitomised the challenge of integrating a device designed solely for efficiency into a living space. The survey, based on real-life observations and numerous testimonies, revealed the need to rethink the trolley as an object of habitability: adaptable and modular, grafted with domestic furniture, incorporating soft lighting as a temporal and spatial landmark (through changing hues), offering proximity services, and even a mobile screen for privacy and spatial reference. This

project showed that even the most technical objects can be reconfigured based on the lived experiences and sensitivities of those involved, to gently support the daily lives of everyone (caregivers, residents, and visitors).





The care home thus emerges not as a space of withdrawal, but as a living component of the neighbourhood, traversed by social bonds, intergenerational exchanges, and shared ways of living. This shift in perspective—from medical care to an expanded care that includes comfort, dignity, empathy, and openness to others—outlines a design of singularities capable of accompanying ageing without standardising it, by connecting it to life and society.

Conclusion

These research projects trace a common trajectory: that of a design rooted in inquiry and sensitive experience, opening spaces for expression for ageing individuals and those around them. Inquiry, understood as both a creative tool and an empathetic

stance, gathers perceptions, emotions, and gestures often invisible. It reveals that old age cannot be grasped as a homogeneous category, but as a plurality of singular situations, stories, and identities, redefining ways of living fully, to the very end.

1. This research was carried out in 2023-2024 in two nursing homes in the Loir -et-Cher department as part of a public contract awarded to the « Activating solidarities » composed by : Courtoisie urbaine, Aetc, Roxane Andrès, Charles Vitez Architecte, Vulpes Consulting, Boulay & Levy Avocats, Raoul Tachon Conseil .