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The Transformative Role of Design in Urban Development: The Case of the Ceará Design Center - Kuya

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ABSTRACT

The role of design in sustainable urban development is examined through the Ceará Design Center – Kuya, located in Fortaleza, the capital city of the state of Ceará, Brazil. Inaugurated in 2022, Kuya represents a public design policy aimed at promoting social inclusion, strengthening the creative economy, and fostering environmentally sustainable practices, directly impacting more than 35,000 people. The term Kuya derives from the Tupi-Guarani expression Mara Kuya, referring to the fruit that serves, symbolizing the center’s commitment to serving society. The center operates as a platform connecting culture, innovation, territory, and public policy, highlighting the strategic potential of design in urban transformation processes. By integrating past and contemporary design policy frameworks, Kuya demonstrates how design can be strategically mobilized to support more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable

development models, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: *Design; Sustainability; Innovation; Sustainable Development; Citizenship.*

Introduction

Design for All has moved from a specialized concept focused on accessibility to a broad framework for inclusive development. Influenced by debates on social equity, human rights, and participatory governance, this approach situates design at the intersection of creativity, social justice, and urban policy. It challenges traditional hierarchies in design – transferring agency from experts to communities and prioritizing lived experience, diversity, and environmental stewardship. This shift echoes global commitments such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda, which emphasize inclusivity, resilience, and citizen participation in shaping urban futures.

Historically, design has been used to generate marketable artifacts, streamline production processes, or enhance user experience. However, the urgency of contemporary urban challenges – from spatial segregation to climate vulnerability – requires design to operate at systemic levels, redefining its purpose as a civic and public good. In this light, design becomes a means not only to solve discrete problems but to reframe how cities are imagined, governed, and lived.

In Brazil, this transformation began to gain institutional shape in the 1990s through the creation of state-level design centers under the Programa Brasileiro do Design (Brazilian Design Program). I had the

opportunity to actively participate in this program, contributing to public strategies that positioned design as a tool for regional development and social inclusion. That experience deepened my understanding of design as a vector for territorial regeneration and helped inspire the values that underpin the Ceará Design Center – Kuya¹.

This article focuses on Kuya, a pioneering public design initiative in Fortaleza. Positioned in the heart of the city, Kuya represents a sustained attempt to embed inclusive design within urban strategies that intersect culture, education, community participation, and socio- economic regeneration. By exploring its genesis, practices, and challenges, the article contributes to international discussions on design in public governance and offers a model for other cities in the Global South and beyond.

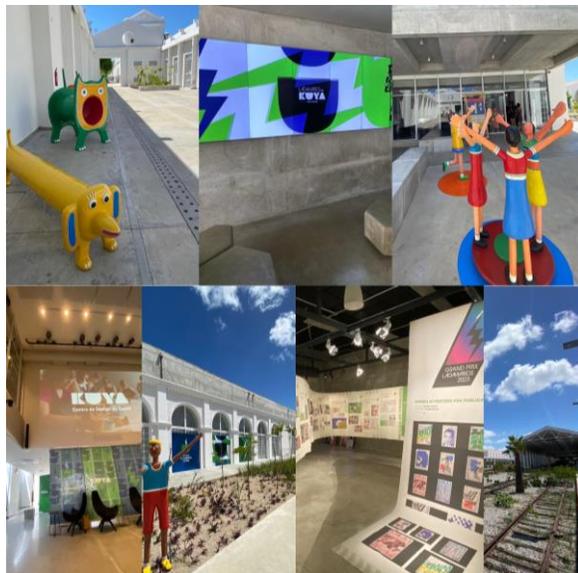


Figure 1 – Photo set of the Kuya Design Center – Photo by the author.

¹<https://institutomirante.org/kuya-centro-de-design-do-ceara/>

2. Context and Origins: Fortaleza and the Historic Downtown

Fortaleza, the capital of the state of Ceará in northeastern Brazil, is home to more than 2.6 million people and is characterized by striking socio-spatial disparities. The historic downtown area, once the center of economic and cultural life, suffered decades of disinvestment during the late 20th century. As middle-class populations relocated to suburban developments, public spaces in the core became neglected, businesses closed, and cultural institutions struggled to maintain relevance. This pattern reflects broader trends in Latin American metropolises, where inner cities increasingly became arenas of exclusion rather than hubs of interaction.

Urban revitalization efforts in many contexts have prioritized real estate investment and infrastructure upgrades, often ignoring the needs and aspirations of existing residents. Such approaches frequently lead to gentrification, a process of socio-spatial transformation in which rising property values and the influx of higher-income groups displace lower-income residents. Against this backdrop, Fortaleza's downtown faced the risk of becoming a "beautified vacancy", a restored façade without social substance.

Recognizing these dynamics, policymakers and cultural actors in Ceará sought alternative pathways for regeneration – ones that foreground social cohesion, cultural memory, and inclusive economic participation. The rehabilitation of the Estação das Artes, a former railway station transformed into a cultural complex, marked a symbolic and material investment in the city's heritage. Within this broader initiative, the Ceará Design Center – Kuya emerged as a

vehicle for harnessing design as a socially oriented practice rather than a market commodification tool.

3. Kuya: A Public Design Policy Rooted in Inclusion and Participation

The creation of Kuya was not merely a cultural project; it was a deliberate policy innovation guided by principles of participatory engagement and territorial equity. The center was designed to serve multiple functions: as a laboratory, education space, production hub, and platform for cultural exchange. Its conceptual foundation rests on four interrelated axes:

- **Decolonial Design**, challenging dominant paradigms by foregrounding local and Indigenous perspectives;
- **Political Design**, recognizing design as a practice embedded in power relations and civic life;
- **Eco efficient Design**, integrating environmental responsibility into design processes;
- **Regenerative Design**, pursuing restoration and renewal of ecological and social systems.

This framework positions Kuya as more than a venue; it is a discursive and operational space where design intersects with civic values and territorial identities. Operating under public governance, the center employs transparent selection processes for its staff and leadership, emphasizing diversity, inclusion, and representation. Calls for participation in programs and courses include affirmative action provisions, ensuring that historically marginalized groups, Black, Indigenous, LGBTQIAPN+, and persons with disabilities, have

pathways to engagement.

Kuya’s internal governance is designed to reflect its public mission. Unlike design institutions driven by commercial imperatives, Kuya operates with the explicit goal of redistributing access to cultural and creative capital. Its institutional arrangements, from funding structures to program selection, are oriented toward social purpose rather than market viability alone.



Figure 2 – Entrance of Estação das Artes (former Central Railway Station) – Photo by the author

4. Programs, Practices, and Impact

Kuya’s activities span a wide range of formats, each designed to activate different dimensions of design practice and engagement:

- **Educational Programs:** Courses, workshops, and seminars in areas such as editorial design, decolonial practice, political design, and eco-design. These programs have included both face- to- face and online modalities, ensuring broader access.
- **Professional Development:** Mentorship and portfolio review sessions aimed at supporting emerging designers and cultural producers in developing sustainable practices.
- **Exhibitions and Events:** Curated shows and dialogues that bring public attention to socially engaged design projects and stimulate critical reflection.
- **Feiraskuya de Design Autoral:** Markets and fairs that provide visibility, networking opportunities, and economic pathways for independent designers and artisans.

Importantly, these initiatives operate through open public calls, with transparent criteria and selection processes. Participation is not limited to formal design professionals; community members, students, and cultural actors from diverse backgrounds are actively engaged. Through these programs, Kuya has reached more than 35,000 participants since 2022, including residents of rural and peripheral areas reached through outreach strategies such as mobile activations and local partnerships.

Data from participants and program assessments indicate that Kuya’s approach fosters not only technical capabilities, but also collective agency and critical design thinking. Survey responses reveal increased confidence in civic engagement, heightened awareness of cultural heritage, and enhanced capacity to initiate community-based initiatives.



Figure 3 – Entrance of Kuya within Estação das Artes – Photo by the author.



Figure 4 – Interior of Kuya, reception area – Photo by the author.

5. Anti-Gentrification and Community Empowerment

A distinct element of Kuya’s philosophy is its explicit resistance to gentrification as a by-product of cultural revitalization. Rather than acting as a magnet for private investment or reinventing the city center as a sanitized consumer space, Kuya centers its mission on community empowerment and territorial continuity.

This is visible in several aspects:

- **Co-Design Methodologies:** Programs actively involve residents in shaping activities and outcomes, moving beyond consultation to *shared authorship*.
- **Local Memory Practices:** Exhibitions and research projects foreground narratives and spatial histories of long-term residents, affirming localized identity.
- **Economic Inclusion:** The *FeirasKuya de Design Autoral* provide structured opportunities for community-based producers to access markets without intermediary gatekeepers.

By prioritizing *permanence over replacement*, Kuya aligns urban regeneration goals with social justice. Its projects build social infrastructure by strengthening networks, fostering intergenerational exchange, and amplifying local capacity for innovation.

Field observations and participant testimonies suggest that Kuya’s presence has contributed to a reinvigoration of public life in the surrounding neighbourhoods, increasing foot traffic, strengthening inter-community ties, and enhancing local cultural production without inflating property speculation.



Figure 5 – Interior of Kuya, auditorium staircase – Photo by the author.

6. Embedding Design for All in Urban Governance

Kuya’s relevance extends beyond localized practice; it signifies a paradigm shift in how design is integrated into urban governance. Traditional urban policy often separates design from planning, relegating it to aesthetic or technical concerns. In contrast, Kuya positions design as a systemic resource that connects policy areas such as education, culture, economic development, and environmental strategy.

The center’s alignment with global frameworks like the UN

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda underscores its strategic orientation. By emphasizing accessibility (SDG 10), sustainable cities (SDG 11), and responsible production (SDG 12), Kuya demonstrates how design can operationalize global goals at local scales.

Its recognition within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network further situates Kuya within an international community of practice. Fortaleza’s participation in this network amplifies local innovations, enabling South- South exchange and collective learning.

Embedding Design for All within governance requires commitment to continuity, adaptability, and reflexivity. Kuya models this by maintaining iterative feedback loops with stakeholders, conducting impact evaluations, and adjusting programs according to emerging needs and insights. This institutional reflexivity, common to effective public policy, enables Kuya to remain responsive to social dynamics and to evolve as contexts change.

Ensuring the continuity of inclusive design policies requires stable public commitment. Kuya’s experience shows that lasting impact depends on long-term investment and institutional support.

7. Conclusion

The case of the Ceará Design Center – Kuya illustrates that Design for All can function as an operational framework for inclusive urban transformation. By engaging communities, democratizing access to design knowledge, and aligning with public policy objectives, Kuya transcends traditional boundaries of design practice.

Rather than pursuing superficial revitalization, Kuya enacts *regenerative processes* that prioritize human dignity, collective

agency, and environmental awareness. Its work demonstrates that design, when oriented toward the common good, can contribute to sustainable, just, and vibrant urban life.

Kuya’s experience offers valuable lessons for other cities seeking to integrate design into development strategies – particularly in contexts where inequality, cultural fragmentation, and environmental challenges coexist. Ultimately, Kuya affirms that design’s greatest potential lies not in objects or markets, but in its capacity to nurture inclusive systems, shared imaginaries, and civic futures.

As global cities face growing pressure to rebuild social trust and ecological balance, initiatives like Kuya serve as powerful reminders that inclusive design must become central to urban planning. Its model invites policymakers, designers, and civil society actors to co-create structures of belonging, cultural affirmation, and economic opportunity. By translating universal principles of accessibility and participation into locally grounded practices, Kuya expands what is possible in the field of public design – not only in Brazil, but globally.

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