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The Role of (Process) Design in Politics:

State of Play and Why the Sector May Do Well to Consider a Rebranding

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About the Author

Chiara Rosselli is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the APROPOS Group, a politically neutral think tank dedicated to improving how we design spaces for political dialogue and collaboration.

She also serves as Head of the Open European Dialogue, Europe's first dialogue platform for elected politicians. Its methods have been recognised by the OECD as a global best practice for cross-border collaboration and featured in the Routledge Handbook of Collective Intelligence for Governance and Democracy.

Chiara was the lead designer of the inaugural edition of the APROPOS Policy Design Sprint, an Adaptive Leadership trainer with the Olivetti Leadership Institute, and the President of Italy's Adaptive Leadership Community.

Takeaways from recent research into the role of design in politics and reflections on what Political Process Design could contribute to the current design for policy debate.

Understanding the intersection of design and politics is no easy feat, and for good reason.

It would take a PhD just to map out the basic elements that compose the design-in-policy ecosystem in a somewhat comprehensive way. This is partially because the field itself is in the process of being built and exploring itself, where it begins and ends, what distinguishes the design for policy ecosystem from other approaches to policymaking, and so on, and so forth.

In this piece, I pull from, and unpack what I believe are the most interesting findings from a recent and extremely informative research paper: "Design and Policy: Current debates and future directions for research in the UK".

The paper, produced by the University of the Arts London and the University of Manchester, collects the insights of over a dozen researchers after 18 months of consultations with the first cross-disciplinary design and policy research network, which saw the participation of over 700 people from academia, government, and policy.

The paper provides valuable insights into the UK market, from which we can draw some conclusions about the state of play of the sector as a whole.

I will attempt to add to the conversation by contributing some personal reflections based on the combined experience of the Open European Dialogue and APROPOS – Advancing Process in Politics designing and delivering high-impact user-centric political conversations across party lines as well as political collaboration infrastructures designed to break down expertise silos.

In so doing, I will venture to explore how the notion of Political Process Design, which we are developing as a design framework at APROPOS, could potentially contribute to advancing our collective understanding of the role of design in politics and accelerate its adoption in political circles.

Our personal experience of the design and policy field is very much in line with the research's conclusions that point to the fact that the field of design in politics may be at a critical conjuncture.

It seems that the relationship between design and politics is evolving at a quite rapid pace, which can only lead me to second the recommendation of the research consortium highlighting the need for more investment in cross-disciplinary research and testing.

Yet, beyond more research, the sector might also need to, sooner rather than later, put some more thought into reconsidering its branding and positioning to better express to political actors, emergent and established alike, the centrality and true potential of the function of design in politics.

A growing field fueled by complexity

The UAL and UM consortium of researchers identifies a growing field in research and practice devoted to exploring the contribution and relationship between design and politics. The reason for this increasing interest is linked to the growing complexity, uncertainty and urgency of the challenges faced by policymakers, further exacerbated by popular contestations and democratic discontent [i]. The paper argues that, in this context, an increasing institutionalisation of design in government is a sign that design approaches are seen as a means to assist policymakers in navigating such complexity.

Types of design

The research consortium touches upon different classifications of design approaches in some depth, as well as offering entirely new categories, although categorisation is still the subject of extensive and ongoing research and debate.

Below is a short selection of a few of the different types of design and their distinctive contributions, which I believe may be of interest to a broader audience of political and policy operators.

Design for real-life policy testing | an instrument to help policymakers take more calculated risks in policy, helping them visualise and test how policies are perceived and play out in real life, gathering valuable evidence from user experience before policy is legislated [ii].

Design to imagine the future | a way to help revive political imagination, transcending the limits of what we imagine possible, offering new ways to imagine the future, via the design of instruments and spaces that encourage creative and collaborative future making [iii].

Design to break out of groupthink | a means to design activities that can generate feedback or insights that are often overlooked by decision-makers, usually by orchestrating some form of 'unlearning' [iv] or creating the opportunity to empathise with different lived experiences and perspectives.

Design for participation and collaborative decisionmaking | deliberation processes designed for the meaningful inclusion of different perspectives and expertise to activate collective intelligence in exploring policy problems and defining policy options[v]. This approach is also described in our Open European Dialogue Declaration [vi], which explicitly focuses on the design of dialogue spaces for trust-building across different political views.

Defining Design as an Overarching Function

There are also approaches to the field that adopt more cross-cutting definitions, which I find more effective and more convincing than organising the different strands of design by their individual contributions. To me, this feels like a somewhat arbitrary and unnecessary splintering of the field.

Comprehensive definitions of the function of design endeavour, instead, to bring together the different individual contributions of

design described above (and others) into a unified conceptual framework for the overarching function of design in politics.

Michael Saward's 'Design for Polity', is a prime example, looking at how design can infuse systems in a more comprehensive way, where different creative and participatory processes can be activated to offer a mode of imagination, collective action and experimental doing for a wider system of governance, policy and political decision-making [vii].

This view is in line with the UK Government Policy Lab's definition of design as a contribution to the political operating system, as outlined in the 'Government as a System Toolkit', in which the UK Government Policy Lab breaks down the different levels and functions of government illustrating the different stages at which design can operate [viii].

In a similar vein, the research network also highlights Andrew Knight's definition of design as a "multidisciplinary nervous system for civil servants and others, promoting ways of working that are collaborative and constructive across silos and professions" [ix].

Following in this track, it is impossible not to quote Ezio Manzini's pivotal notion of 'diffuse design', which states how everybody is endowed with a "natural" design capacity and that design is a function that belongs to all human beings invested in charting a course of action with the ambition to "improve the state of things" [x].

"We are all designers (…) individuals but also organisations, businesses, public entities, voluntary associations, and cities, regions, and states. (…) every subject, whether individual or collective, who in a world in transformation must determine their own identity and their own life project.

(…)

[It's] a way of thinking and doing things that entails reflection and strategic sense, that calls us to look at ourselves and our context and decide whether and how to act to improve the state of things." [xi]

Manzini nonetheless notes that the capacity of individuals to design effectively must be cultivated. Which "does not usually happen, or it happens in an inadequate way" [xii].

He calls for a rethinking of the role of design experts to act as a bridge between the profession of design and the practice of diffuse (a.k.a. non-expert) design.

At different moments in his 'Design, When Everybody Designs' book, and in related interviews, Manzini refers to designers as:

- **a profession rooted less in a method and more in a cultural background** [xiii];

- **people who are particularly equipped with conceptual and operational tools to support designing processes**;

- **people with the ability to create the conditions for big changes** [xiv];

- **and whose role is to help a variegated array of social actors to design better** [xv].

INTRODUCING POLITICAL PROCESS DESIGN

Our own understanding of design, encapsulated in the framework of Political Process Design, very much falls within Manzini's view of design as an essential human function, and hence of the pervasive role of designers in society and in politics.

Why we resonate so deeply with Manzini's approach is that it aligns very much with our mission at APROPOS, which is to:

- demystify the act of design for politics;

- disseminate the understanding that all of us engaged in political action can and should be concerned with design and endowed with design capabilities;

- and democratise the tool of design to encourage its adoption at all levels of the political and policy field.

Political Process Design

With Political Process Design we intend to describe the intentional design of political dialogue and collaboration spaces that are fit-for-purpose and designed to enable the conditions for making progress on complex political challenges – especially between political stakeholders with different perspectives and interests.

Our understanding of Political Process Design specifically pursues the creation of political processes and spaces which take into account the fundamental elements of good dialogue, the reality of human cognition and behaviour, and the relative drivers and hurdles to human collaboration and decision-making, while being rooted in the distinctive qualities of political challenges, political discourse, and dialectic.

The practice of Political Process Design is:

i. **fit-for-purpose**, in that it tailors its design intervention to fit the specific needs of a given political context and challenge, it refuses to indiscriminately apply a one-size-fits-all design solution or design methodology;

ii. **profoundly human-centric**, in that it designs spaces that elevate political thinking while centring the notion of 'bounded rationality' of political decision-makers and the role of cognitive limitations and emotions in decision-making;

iii. **politically aware**, in that it recognises the negotiation of value and interest-based conflicts as central

to the exercise of politics, and is informed by an understanding of policymaking processes;

iv. **non-partisan**, in that its core function is methodological and non-ideological, with the objective of enabling more strategic, effective, and efficient political deliberation, decision-making, and collaboration spaces.

The term Political Process Design is not intended to describe a single, specific methodology per se. Rather, it captures a way of thinking — politically and strategically — while drawing on diverse methods and approaches tailored to the specific political challenge, the political stakeholders involved, and their desired outcomes.

The scope of the practice is to support enhanced political collaboration in contexts where it is most needed. Its purpose is to foster more constructive, generative interaction among political actors.

Our understanding of design is originally inspired by the basic definition proposed in Herbert A. Simon's seminal work from 1969, The Sciences of the Artificial: "Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" [xvi].

We see design as pervasive and intrinsic to how the political sector functions — across the policy cycle, levels of governance, and stakeholder groups.

In this light, all political actors can be seen as designers of political interventions — though their design choices are often implicit, unconscious, or unexamined.

By introducing the term Political Process Design, we seek to make these often implicit choices more visible, foster awareness of how they shape political outcomes, and expand the use in politics of the design-informed theories, practices, and traditions that Political Process Design draws on — encouraging political actors to approach political processes with greater awareness and intentionality, knowing that the 'how' of politics is malleable and subject to creative redesign.

The Political Process Designer

A Political Process Designer's function is hence that of guiding political actors through dialogue and collaborative efforts, leveraging tailored design choices, and fostering shared progress on complex political challenges.

Within this framework, a Political Process Designer (PPDer) emerges as a distinct practitioner role — a political solutions architect.

The PPDer intentionally designs and facilitates constructive interaction among political actors who hold divergent values and interests, crafting processes that channel these differences toward productive ends.

The PPDer's core mandate is to guide a group from an initial problematic state (state A) — often characterised by conflict, impasse, or ambiguity — to a more productive state (state B) marked by greater clarity, collaboration, and an enhanced problem-solving capacity.

In doing so, the PPDer offers design

expertise in service of shared progress, focusing on how stakeholders engage rather than on any single policy outcome.

As a specialist in process, the PPDer applies a tailored repertoire of design choices, selecting and adapting methods to fit the unique political context and challenge at hand.

This repertoire is deployed with deep political awareness: the PPDer keenly understands the negotiation dynamics inherent in politics, including the value conflicts, power asymmetries, and institutional constraints that shape political discourse, and is able to combine this knowledge with methodological approaches that can encourage new and more sophisticated political thinking and foster shared progress.

Finally, the PPDer embodies a possibility-driven orientation, operating in what Ezio Manzini would call the 'field of possibilities' [xvii], the PPDer is fundamentally engaged in revealing and advancing what is possible, deliberately moving beyond static problem analysis to envision and design new viable pathways for collective progress.

THE PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE POLITICAL PROCESS DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Our understanding of Political Process Design is rooted in an understanding of political discourse as intrinsically conflictual.

We understand this conflictual nature as intrinsic to political discourse and the practice of politics itself, which we see as the negotiation between deeply rooted, often opposing, value preferences. In this sense, we align with Chantal Mouffe's argument in 'Agonistics' that politics is, and ought to be, marked by a productive form of conflict [xviii].

Borrowing from the Berghof Foundation's own approach, we concur, however, that while conflict is inevitable, violence is not [xvix].

Through the instrument of Political Process Design we aim to engage with this reality rather than try to ignore or resist it, deliberately avoiding the artificial depoliticisation of legitimate political debates through the instrument of design.

Our approach is rooted in the belief that the instrument of dialogue and collaboration design must operate differently, and with heightened context-awareness, when addressing political questions, which demand specific sensitivities and a deep understanding of the political DNA we are intervening on.

Our approach to process design for the political sector recognises and puts at its centre the non-rationality of political actors.

There is now ample evidence of the bounded rationality of human decision-making – as illustrated in Daniel Kahneman's seminal work, 'Thinking Fast and Slow' [xx]. We are also aware that this rationality is further frustrated when it comes to political questions, due to the underlying value assumptions that accompany these decisions as well as powerful ingroup and outgroup biases, explored in different aspects by both George Lakhoff in 'Don't Think of An Elephant' [xxi] and Joshua Greene in 'Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and

Them' [xxii].

Yet most spaces for political dialogue, deliberation and decision-making continue to be designed on the assumption that we are purely rational actors.

With Political Process Design, we seek to integrate insights from cognitive and behavioural science into the architecture of dialogue and decision-making, creating political exchanges that work with process design to deliver fit-for-purpose political exchanges that work with — not against — human cognition and its limitations.

Political Process Design's primary focus is to make existing political spaces more effective, rather than to necessarily change the macro-institutional design of democracy.

While there definitely are implications and takeaways from the practice of Political Process Design that can inform the way we choose to organise democratic decision-making, this approach chooses to concentrate on bridging the gap between intention and implementation [xxiii] when it comes to existing dialogue and deliberative structures, both formal and informal. It is an approach that looks specifically at the micro-level procedural design and aims to craft exchanges which address what, in our understanding, is the main challenge nowadays for design operators in the political field: our lack of effective and constructive dialogue across ideological divides.

Our understanding of the primary focus of the Political Process Designer is not to reinvent the macro-institutional architecture of democracy, but rather to make existing structures function more effectively and efficiently.

That said, we recognise that the role of the Political Process Designer evolves in both scope and ambition, depending on who takes up the practice. It is conceivable — and indeed desirable — that future practitioners will collaborate with democracy experts to contribute to institutional rethinking and reform.

"Democracy is a conversation" – Yuval Noah Harari [xxiv]. Our understanding of Political Process Design encompasses all tools, approaches, and practices whose unified objective is to improve the quality of democratic conversation.

We believe dialogue is the most threatened instrument of democracy nowadays. As polarisation entrenches ever-deeper cleavages between parts of society and the increasing pace of change which policymakers are called upon to govern, our inability to disagree well as a society has turned into an existential threat for our democracies.

We believe dialogue is not just a desirable feature of democracy, but a utilitarian and ethical necessity, as it functions both as an essential tool for diagnosis and sharpened political thinking, as well as representing the core foundational value on which pluralist democracy is built [xxv].

We witness with concern our increasing inability to engage with difficult conversations, and to do so with civility and a constructive approach. This is not merely a failure of our political culture, but also a design flaw in our democratic systems — one that calls for

intentional and skillful intervention. As argued in my previous policy paper, "Avoiding System Failure: How Process Design Can Help Fix Politics", outdated political infrastructures may well be edging us towards a democratic system failure, where key decision-making processes are no longer fit-for-purpose to tackle today's societal challenges [xxvi].

Against this backdrop, the Political Process Design approach embodies the notion that how we design the spaces and processes in which we hold political conversations matters, today more than ever.

ADDRESSING THE KEY CHALLENGE OF DESIGN IN POLITICS TODAY: HOW TO MOVE FROM A NICHE PRACTICE TOWARDS MAINSTREAM ADOPTION

The most critical of challenges for the work of design in politics today, as also highlighted by the UAL consortium, is the issue of adoption.

"Embedding design in mainstream ways of working is crucial. Excellent examples where design has been implemented at a project or pilot level had not always been taken up beyond experimentation.

(…)

[The researchers] argued for more radical approaches to bring about consistent, comprehensive changes in the ways that government institutions operate. Again, this is not a problem in policy that is peculiar to design; other changes to how things are typically done have had similar trajectories. System change is hard." [xxvii]

It is important to note that it is not that design's added value has yet to deliver proof of concept.

Across the world examples of the critical impact that good design can have on policy and politics are abound. Whole volumes have been written on the topic, collecting best practices which highlight how new designs, engagement formats, and the organisation of our political dialogue, deliberation and mobilisation spaces can have a massive and unprecedented impact on political and policy outcomes. One such volume is the 'Routledge Handbook of Collective Intelligence for Democracy and Governance' [xxviii], in which we are honoured to have our Open European Dialogue case study featured.

Yet, design is confronted with the challenge of making the quantitative leap from a niche, nice-to-have addition to the policymaking infrastructure, to mainstream institutionalisation of the discipline of design as an essential function of the political sector.

It is in this spirit that I wonder whether, to "move towards design approaches that become 'business-as-usual' instead of an innovation that was not scaled up" [xxix] the sector may be in need of a strategic rebranding.

I wonder if whether, alongside the valuable work being done in academic circles to research, segment, and understand various deliverables and typologies of design for policy, we should not be dedicating equal effort to advancing a more comprehensive strategic positioning and marketing of the design for politics tool. This effort would involve highlighting the full range of contributions of design to the political and policymaking sphere – beyond the usual boxes of 'mere' innovation or participatory policymaking, where design is too often narrowly confined.

While these are immensely important contributions that design has made to politics, they neither capture nor do justice to the broader and more pivotal role that design can play in advancing political thought and collective action.

Such framings of the work of design risk turning the tool into a caricature of itself, and fall dramatically short of reflecting the versatility of the design approach and the full scope of design's potential in the political realm.

Design should be understood as a core function within the political sector, which, at its heart, concerns itself with the organisation of human cognition, behaviour and collective action – domains in which the mastery of human-centric design is not just beneficial, but essential.

We have embarked upon the creation of our Political Process Design framework, in a way which we hope can contribute to encourage new ways of thinking and communicating about the role of design in politics, with the aim of making the practice more accessible, compelling, and appealing to a much broader segment of the political sector.

In our conceptualisation of the practice, Political Process Design is a non-negotiable, foundational function of politics, integral to institutions as well as to all political and societal actors who intentionally design fit-for-purpose courses of action in pursuit of political aims.

I believe that if we are to meaningfully communicate the centrality and relevance of design in the political sphere, we must make the discipline more accessible, and its underlying rationale more easily understandable, for a vast majority of political actors, not only those already engaged in democratic innovation.

This point is also touched upon by the researchers of the Design|Policy Research Network consortium [xxx], who highlight that "the design sector could improve how it communicates its unique but varied proposition, making it clearer, more succinct and compelling. (..) more work is needed to recognise and amplify the ways in which design helps improve policy" [xxxi].

OUR PROPOSAL: CAN WE RALLY AROUND DESIGNERS AS THE EMBODIMENT OF A CORE POLITICAL FUNCTION – ONE FUNDAMENTALLY CONCERNED WITH THE 'HOW' OF POLITICS?

At APROPOS, we have been reflecting on how we might contribute our own experience to what we see as an increasingly critical field. We believe that design holds the potential to make profound, even pivotal, contributions to strengthening the political sector.

This means moving beyond efforts to address individual policy or political challenges in isolation.

Instead, choosing to focus – with precision, dedication, and an ever-expanding set of tried-and-tested tools – on understanding and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and spaces that govern the 'how' of politics, and shape the way we inhabit these spaces as human and political beings.

Our conclusion is that we see the emergence of an urgent need.

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This means moving beyond efforts to address individual policy or political challenges in isolation.

Instead, choosing to focus — with precision, dedication, and an ever-expanding set of tried-and-tested tools — on understanding and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and spaces that govern the 'how' of politics.

We require the emboldening of a new type of actor in the political field. One whose primary function is to fulfil the role of a facilitator of political solutions – operating in service of social and political actors.

Very much in line with Manzini's understanding of designers, these actors would possess the professional expertise and cultural awareness of the field of design – and, we argue, of politics.

Their purpose would be to act as neutral facilitators and to intentionally design political dialogue and collaboration spaces which can help create the conditions to make progress on difficult conversations and navigate value tensions between people with different political views.

While we recognise that absolute impartiality and the notion of a neutral facilitator are, to some extent, a chimaera, our understanding of Political Process Design places strong emphasis on the value of neutrality. This perspective is informed by ten years of experience working with elected politicians across the political spectrum and witnessing the benefits of a neutrality-driven approach. We therefore believe that striving to embody the role of an honest broker is an essential prerequisite for any process designer.

We imagine a future in which organisations of designers and facilitators are available to political actors seeking out design services to fulfil their political aims.

We imagine designers in politics becoming as central in their function and contribution as the communications specialist or the political strategist are today.

We imagine a single go-to figure, the Political Process Designer – deployed as either an external consultant or directly embedded in political organisations of all kinds.

The role of the designer would be to serve as a translator of the vast universe of approaches and tools within the design for policy field, supporting the evolving objectives of the political and societal actors they serve.

Their task would be to make the world of design for politics accessible and intelligible, offering sense-making and guidance at every step, while continuously scouting for and seeking to deploy **the right (design) tool at the right time.** It is, in fact, after this concept that we named our organisation 'APROPOS', meaning "very appropriate to a particular situation".

We imagine such a future as a way to help us better understand how we might begin to address some of the key forms of resistance currently hindering the integration and mainstreaming of design tools in the political sector. For example, resistance to "innovation for the sake of innovation" — a concern also highlighted by the UAL research paper — or the tendency to reduce design to post-its and playfulness, which are, of course, valid instruments when used in service of a defined purpose. Yet, these narrow and misguided associations threaten the sustainability and scalability of the design for politics field as a fundamental, cross-cutting democratic function, and increase the risk of us discarding the value of design altogether by "throwing the baby out with the bathwater".

As I come to a close, I'm painfully aware that in the absence of powerful, clear, and accessible messaging on what design can contribute to politics, we face the risk of over-complicating, over-segmenting, or applying an overly

theoretical lens to the practice, obscuring the real soul and ambition of the work: **to be of service to politics, to assist others in the pursuit of change, to empower people through tools and frameworks that can help open up new, previously inaccessible possibilities for collective action.**

I deeply believe in the need to rebrand the act of design for politics, and I think of this paper as a contribution, a way to think out loud and examine some of the challenges our sector faces, and identify how we might position our discipline strategically to have a greater impact in shaping the political culture around us.

I believe, and humbly hope, that our definition of Political Process Design, and in particular the role of the Political Process Designer, can help us do just that. It offers a way to move beyond the fragmentation of our sector with its often alienating language and specialised frameworks, and to begin building a cohesive, powerful movement of people and organisations dedicated to improving how politics works.

By focusing on the design of political processes and spaces, we can strengthen the governing capacity of the political sector and, in doing so, strengthen democracy itself. This can ensure that our democratic system is effective, efficient, and fit-for-purpose: capable of adapting to the needs and psychology of our modern-day society, addressing today's divisive political challenges and delivering meaningful collective solutions.

Endnotes

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Fig. 1.

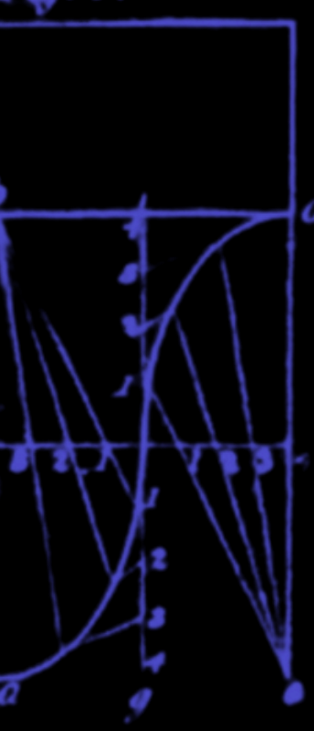
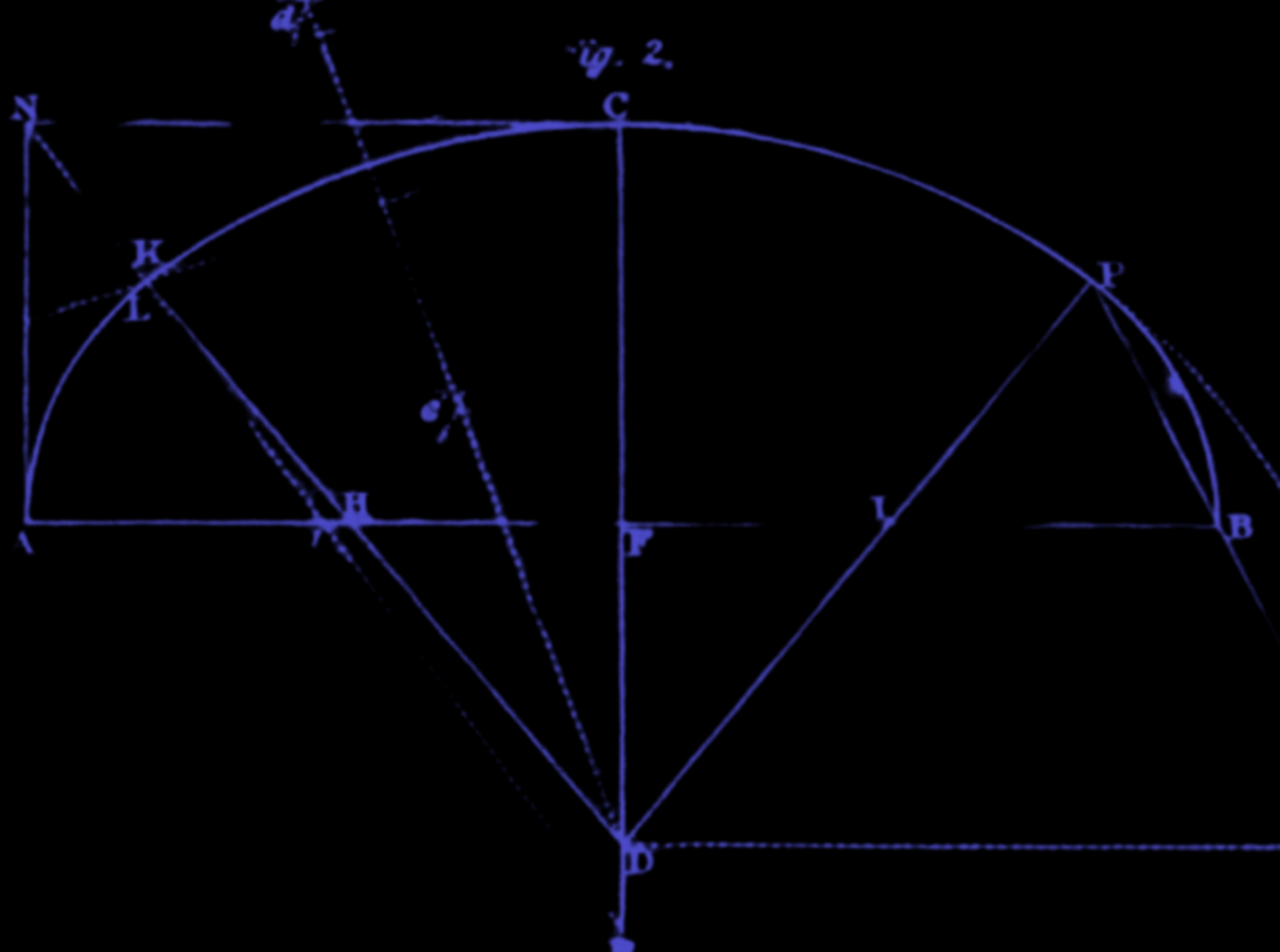


Fig. 2

Fig. 2.



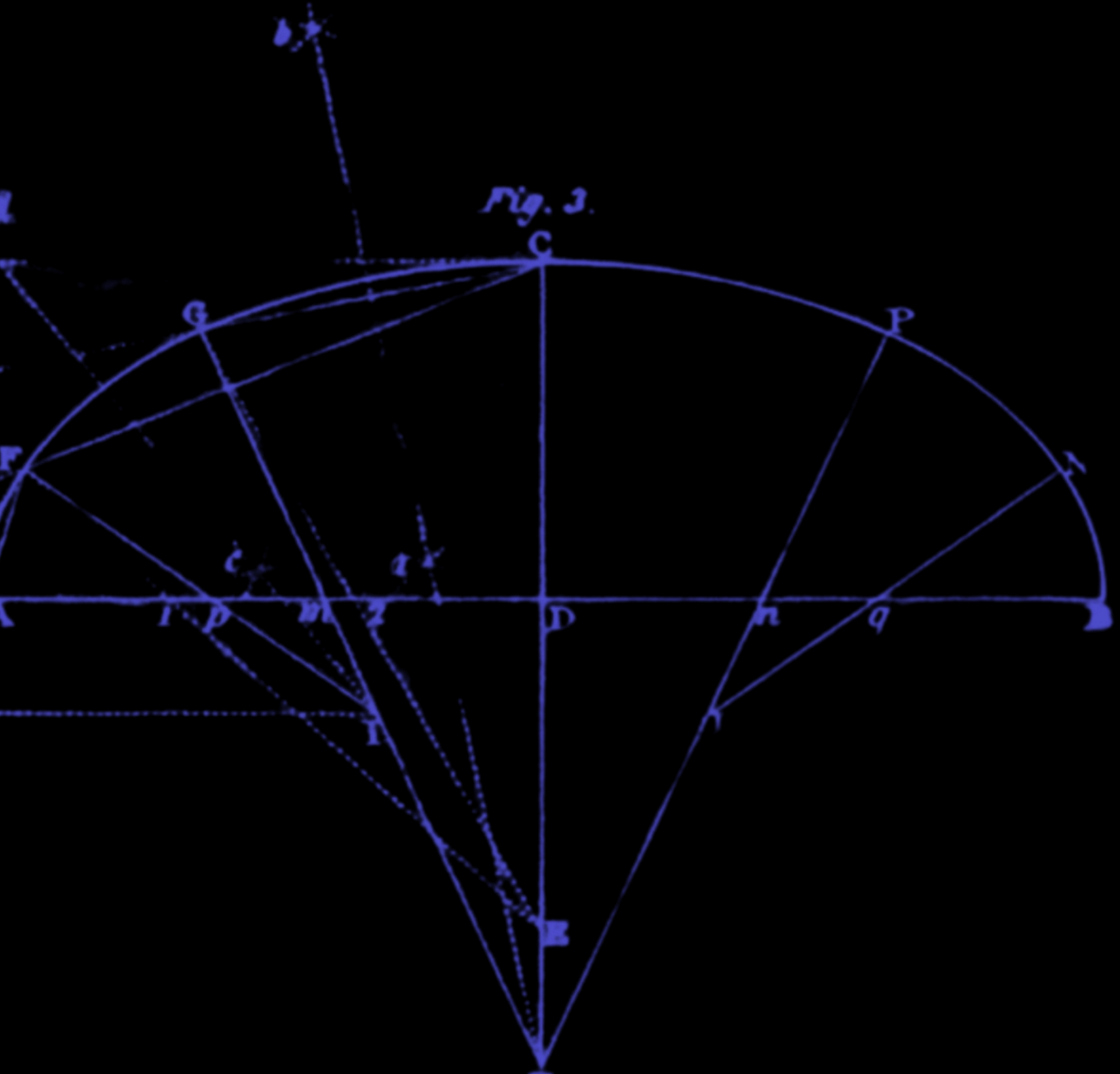


Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

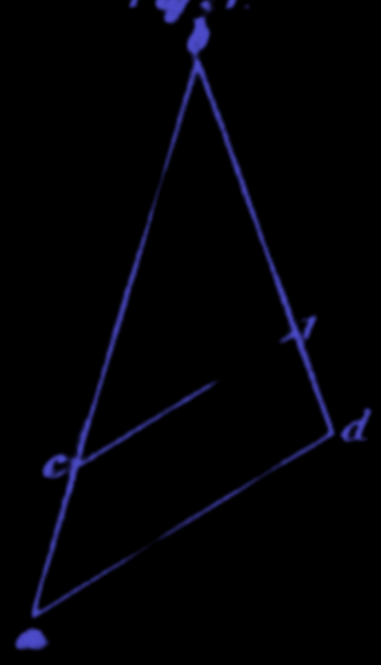


Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.

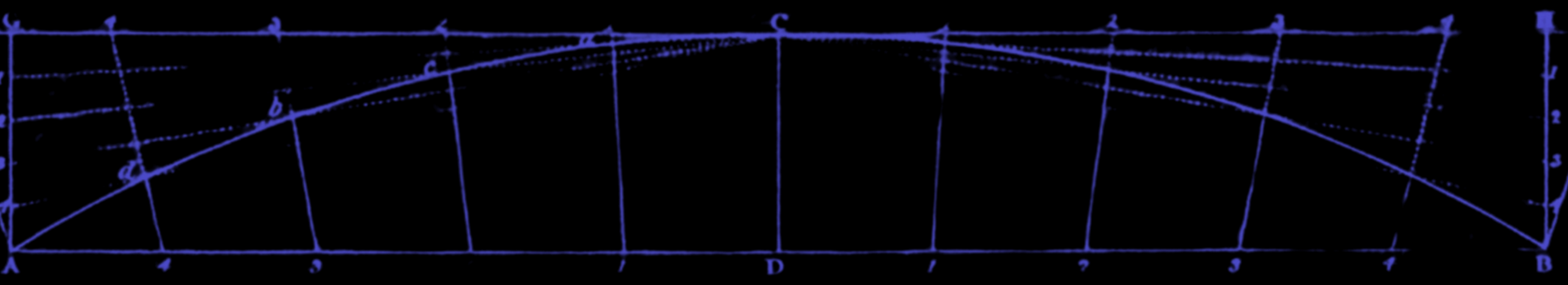
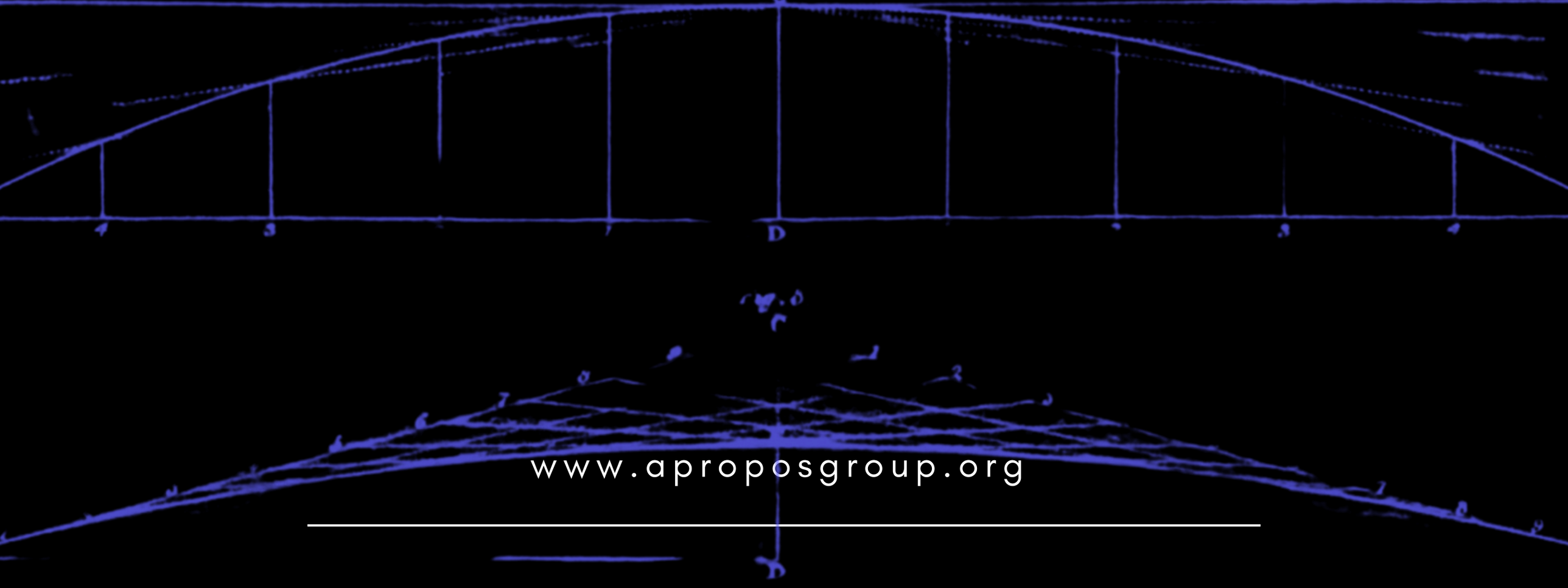


Fig. 7.



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