ZEITGEIST 2026
Conference Outcomes & Knowledge Contributions

International Conference on Cultural, Spatial & Sensory Futures of Art, Design and Architecture
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Convened by the World University of Design

A Report

ZEITGEIST 2026 was convened at a moment when architecture, art, and design are being compelled to re-evaluate their foundational assumptions. Accelerated digital transformation, climate instability, social inequity, and cultural dislocation have collectively altered how spaces are produced, how objects are consumed, and how meaning is constructed. The conference adopted Zeitgeist, the spirit of the time, not as a metaphor, but as an analytical framework to understand how these forces are reshaping creative practice and human experience.

The scale and diversity of submissions reflected a global community of scholars and practitioners actively engaging with these shifts. Rather than treating technology, sustainability, or heritage as isolated domains, ZEITGEIST 2026 framed them as interconnected dimensions of cultural, spatial, and sensory futures. The conference therefore positioned creative disciplines as active agents in shaping societal transformation, rather than as reactive or decorative practices.

Reframing Creative Practice: From Objects to Lived Experience

A central intellectual outcome of ZEITGEIST 2026 was the clear movement away from object-centric and form-led paradigms toward experience-based understandings of design and architecture. This shift was articulated across multiple papers that foregrounded perception, emotion, behaviour, and embodiment as primary design concerns.

Sneha Maji and Akhil Das, through their experimental study on multisensory virtual reality in the Red Fort complex, demonstrated how combinations of visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli significantly alter users' sense of presence, understanding, and appreciation of cultural heritage. Their findings challenge the long-standing dominance of visual representation in architectural interpretation and argue for a more holistic sensory framework. Complementing this, Vikash Kumar and Satish Shivarudraiah's research on emotional responses to public space design established direct links between spatial features and affective reactions, reinforcing the idea that design decisions operate simultaneously at psychological and sensory levels.

In digital and educational contexts, Manpreet Kushwaha and Jay Y. Patel's post-2021 global review of UX/UI design for Gen Z learners reframed online learning platforms as experiential environments rather than neutral information systems. By linking interface design to motivation, autonomy, and cognitive engagement, their work aligned digital design with broader human-centred theories of experience.

Collectively, these contributions signal a significant recalibration of creative practice. Design outcomes are increasingly evaluated not by visual novelty or formal complexity, but by their capacity to shape lived experience, influence behaviour, and support human wellbeing across physical and virtual environments.

Artificial Intelligence and Digital Futures as Cultural Practice

Artificial intelligence and immersive technologies constituted one of the most prominent thematic clusters at ZEITGEIST 2026. Importantly, contributors did not treat AI merely as a productivity tool, but as a cultural force reshaping authorship, creativity, ethics, and professional identity.

Kakoli Talukdar's literature review on AI-enabled design development critically examined how generative tools disrupt traditional notions of originality and ownership. By introducing the concept of distributed authorship, where designers, algorithms, datasets, and prompts collectively shape outcomes, her work highlighted the inadequacy of existing intellectual property frameworks in addressing hybrid creative processes. This concern was echoed by Neelarnab Dutta, who explored the implications of AI-generated design for industrial design practice, pedagogy, and intellectual property, arguing for the urgent need to redefine professional and legal boundaries.

From an architectural perspective, Nimisha Varghese and Ajai Chandran CK examined prompt engineering as an emerging design skill, demonstrating how AI can accelerate iteration, expand creative possibilities, and enhance communication when strategically integrated into practice. Their work emphasized that meaningful AI adoption depends not on automation, but on the preservation of human judgment, ethical oversight, and disciplinary intent.

The emotional and behavioural dimensions of AI were addressed by A. Bhattacharjee and colleagues, whose research proposal examined how AI systems influence human emotions, decision-making, and social norms. By situating AI within affective computing and behavioural theory, this work extended the discourse beyond efficiency and innovation to questions of trust, dependency, and psychological impact.

Together, these papers positioned digital futures as cultural terrains requiring critical engagement. ZEITGEIST 2026 thus contributed to a more nuanced understanding of AI, not as a deterministic force, but as a design material whose societal implications must be consciously shaped.

Sensory Futures and Immersive Spatial Experience

The conference made a substantial contribution to expanding the understanding of space as a multisensory and embodied phenomenon. Several studies challenged the primacy of vision in spatial design, arguing instead for integrated sensory approaches that acknowledge sound, smell, tactility, and movement as equally formative.

Monika and Ritika Raj's work on AR-based immersive learning environments for human anatomy illustrated how spatialised, interactive experiences can transform cognitive understanding and pedagogical engagement. Similarly, Veda Arvind and Anoop Saxena's participatory augmented

reality installation demonstrated how immersive environments can foster cultural immersion and community engagement, positioning users as active participants rather than passive spectators.

These experiential explorations were supported by methodological innovation. Sneha Maji and Akhil Das combined ethnographic observation with experimental evaluation to assess behavioural presence in virtual environments, signalling a growing recognition that sensory experience requires mixed methods of inquiry.

By foregrounding sensory futures, ZEITGEIST 2026 expanded spatial discourse beyond form and function, reinforcing the need for design approaches that acknowledge the full spectrum of human perception in both physical and digital environments.

Heritage, Memory, and Cultural Continuity in a Changing World

Heritage emerged as a deeply interconnected and conceptually rich theme throughout the conference. Contributors consistently rejected static notions of preservation, instead framing heritage as a living, evolving process shaped through participation, reinterpretation, and contemporary relevance.

Xiaolu Wang, Rowan Bailey, Nic Clear, and colleagues, in their work on the digital documentation of historic post offices in the UK, demonstrated how cultural frameworks can be embedded within digital surveys to preserve not only physical form but social memory and institutional narratives. Similarly, Dhwani Gala and co-authors explored immersive and participatory heritage walks as tools for crafting shared cultural futures, highlighting how experience-based engagement can strengthen collective memory.

Traditional knowledge systems and sacred geometries were examined by Sunakshi Shokeen, Harmanpreet Kaur, and Karan Jain, who analysed cross-cultural perspectives on cosmology and architecture, and by Varsha Shukla and Vijay Kumar, who investigated the application of Vastu and cosmological principles in contemporary residential design. These studies reinforced the relevance of indigenous epistemologies in shaping future spatial practices.

By situating heritage within contemporary design discourse, ZEITGEIST 2026 demonstrated that cultural continuity and innovation are not opposing forces, but mutually sustaining dimensions of creative futures.

Community, Co-creation, and Social Design Responsibility

A strong ethical orientation towards community engagement and co-creation was evident across multiple contributions. Design and architecture were repeatedly positioned as relational practices embedded within social systems rather than autonomous acts of authorship.

Arzoo Kadian and Rajat Verma's work on co-creation in Indian vernacular architecture articulated a heritage-based approach to contemporary practice that centres community participation and local knowledge. This perspective was reinforced by Renu Khanna and colleagues, who examined co-

creation and community participation across art, design, and architecture, highlighting shared authorship as a pathway to sustainable cultural revitalisation.

Studies such as Rohit Bharti and Ayla Khan's work on inclusive heritage experiences and Ilaria Rapaccini Bellini and co-authors' exploration of collective wellbeing and community resilience further extended social design discourse into domains of accessibility, equity, and shared futures.

Through these contributions, ZEITGEIST 2026 advanced a vision of creative practice grounded in social responsibility, ethical engagement, and collaborative agency.

Sustainability, Regeneration, and Circular Design Thinking

Sustainability at ZEITGEIST 2026 was addressed not as a technical checklist, but as a cultural and ethical framework. Contributors explored regenerative design through material reuse, adaptive architecture, and indigenous systems of repair and resilience.

Pallavi Pathak's study on adaptive reuse for sustainable heritage and urban renewal in Nashik demonstrated how existing built environments can be reimagined as catalysts for social and ecological regeneration. Vaishnavi Shantikari and Neelarnab Dutta's exploration of waste-to-worth design in the reuse of dog hair waste exemplified how circular design principles can be embedded within everyday material practices.

Indigenous repair systems were foregrounded by Dolly Kumar's work on Rafugari and Babita Bhandari's examination of visible mending as green aesthetics, positioning repair not only as sustainability practice but as cultural expression.

These contributions collectively reframed sustainability as a narrative, ethical, and cultural commitment rather than a purely technological solution.

Pedagogy, Design Education, and Future Literacies

The conference made significant contributions to rethinking design education in response to emerging technological, cultural, and social realities. Several papers addressed how future designers must be equipped with critical, ethical, and experiential competencies alongside technical skills.

Neha Singh and Priyanka Gupta's critical examination of AI in design education highlighted the challenges faced by pedagogues in balancing technological adoption with human-centred values. Khushi Purohit's framework on intentionality in design practice proposed methods for integrating ethics, strategy, and environment within professional training.

Together, these studies positioned education as a key site for shaping future creative agency, reinforcing the role of universities as cultural and ethical institutions rather than mere skill providers.

Project / Product Showcase & Poster Display

The Product Showcase and Poster Presentation segment of ZEITGEIST 2026highlighted a dynamic spectrum of applied research, experimental explorations,and practice-led inquiry. The exhibits foregrounded sustainability—articulatedby Harshil Bhandari, Anupam Rana and colleagues —alongside craft revival and technology-enabled design as central themes. Climate-responsive strategies were presented through the kinetic façade showcase by Mayank Sardiwal and Harmanpreet Kaur, complemented by adaptive reuse studies by Sudesh Sanjay Madane and Anupama Sonpitale. Craft- and material-led investigations such as Pine Needle Craft by Lavdeep Singh, D. Xaxa, S. Kumari and M. Qureshi were presented alongside user-centred product innovations, including The Effectiveness of Print Media Cutouts by Srutinwita Roy and Lolita Dutta, participatory packaging by Krittika Kanagaraj, Bisheshwar Haorongbam and Sudip Adhikary, textile-integrated wearables by Ritu Raj and Umme Hani,notebook binding research by Prachi Singhal, and kinetic toys from silkworm waste by Suvidha P.

Collectively, the showcase demonstrated how material experimentation, community engagement, and emerging technologies converge to shape socially responsive, environmentally conscious, and culturally rooted design futures.

Conclusion: ZEITGEIST 2026 as a Knowledge Platform

ZEITGEIST 2026 succeeded in articulating a coherent and forward-looking body of knowledge that reflects the complexities of the present moment. By integrating digital futures with cultural memory, sensory experience with ethical responsibility, and innovation with community participation, the conference demonstrated how art, design, and architecture can actively shape humane and resilient futures.

The outcomes of ZEITGEIST 2026 establish a strong intellectual foundation for continued inquiry and position the conference as a significant platform for global dialogue on cultural, spatial, and sensory futures.