The Cumulus Strategic Plan

CEB IX
2025-2028

Cumulus Association

President & CEB Message

We are a dynamic forum for the exchange of knowledge and best practices, and a committed advocate for the positive role of designers and artists in shaping a better world.
(The Cumulus Design Declaration, 2025)

Design education stands at a critical juncture. We navigate a world marked by profound geopolitical shifts, environmental urgency, rapid technological transformation, and widespread conflicts that challenge our capacity to maintain dialogue across differences. Yet it is precisely in these moments of complexity and uncertainty that the role of our global community of design educators becomes most vital.
Cumulus Association has grown remarkably to encompass nearly 370 members from 69 countries, establishing itself as one of the most significant international associations and a point of reference for design education worldwide. When we multiply the number of our member institutions by the educational programs each contains and by the students they host, Cumulus has established a substantial observatory - not only for data collection, but for reflection based on development trends in design education worldwide and for opening global discussions on shared values.

Building on Our Journey: From Vision to Action

The past three years under the leadership of Cumulus Executive Board VIII have been transformative. We successfully navigated the transition from a pandemic-constrained environment back to vibrant in-person engagement while maintaining the digital connections that proved invaluable. We embarked on the complex journey toward true organizational independence, transferring business operations from Aalto University and establishing Cumulus as a direct employer with its own governance structures, HR policies, and financial systems.

Most significantly, we launched an extensive co-design participatory process - "**Let's Co-Design the Future of Cumulus**" - that engaged our entire membership in envisioning what our association could become. Through regional seminars, working group discussions, and open conversations at conferences, we listened to the aspirations, needs, and dreams of our diverse community. This participatory approach was not merely consultative; it became the foundation for the new initiatives that have enriched our ecosystem: the Cumulus Talent Camp that provides unique opportunities for students across our network, the Regional Meetings that bring internationalization closer to home, the PhD Network that connects doctoral programs worldwide, and the expanded role of our Working Groups as incubators for collaborative projects.

In parallel, we initiated a participatory process to create the **Cumulus Design Declaration**, working alongside our founders Yrjö Sotamaa, Raimo Nikkanen, and Eija Salmi, together with past presidents and members from across our global network. Building on the foundation of the Kyoto Design Declaration - drafted by Yrjö Sotamaa in 2008 as Cumulus's founding value statement - we engaged in extensive co-design workshops to articulate a renewed vision that addresses contemporary challenges: ecological transition, societal regeneration, peace building, ethical thinking, responsible engagement with artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, and design education's role in creating positive change. This new Declaration, born from collective dialogue rather than individual authorship, represents our community's shared commitment to values that will guide us through the complexities ahead.

A New Mandate for Challenging Times

As we begin the 2025-2028 mandate, Cumulus Executive Board IX inherits both remarkable momentum and significant challenges. Each mandate has its own scientific, cultural, political, and organizational characteristics - distinct opportunities and obstacles that differ from those of previous periods. Our new mandate begins in a context of major geopolitical changes and widespread conflicts that require us to pay special attention to remaining an international organization that unites diverse communities around a common table.

This demands particular skills in diplomacy and negotiation to maintain unity while upholding our commitment to peace and building Cumulus as a shared knowledge space where diversity and dialogue are core values. We must balance progressive and strategic management with human respect and empathy, always striving for the unity, democracy, and progress of our Association.

Simultaneously, we face profound transformations driven by artificial intelligence. Generative AI is reshaping not only design practice, requiring curricular shifts from skills training toward research integration and critical thinking, but also threatening traditional educational models and professional structures. As AI handles more craft tasks, workplace pyramids flatten with fewer positions for graduates. As expert systems democratize access to professional knowledge, traditional intermediation faces pressure. Educational institutions may compete with lower-cost AI-delivered alternatives while also fighting for government resources against the pressing healthcare needs of aging populations.

These challenges converge in what has been termed the “poly-crisis”: interconnected issues of affordability, sustainability, social cohesion, health and wellness, and geopolitical uncertainty. Addressing such complexity requires integrated interdisciplinary teams and systems-level thinking—yet our educational structures remain largely specialist-oriented. Design education must evolve rapidly to remain relevant and valuable.

Yet such challenges clarify design education’s essential role. In an age when technical execution becomes democratized, human creativity, ethical judgment, collaborative synthesis, and the ability to navigate complexity become more, not less, critical. In a fragmenting world, spaces for international dialogue become more precious. Cumulus must help design schools navigate these transitions while maintaining the quality, humanity, and community that AI cannot replicate. We must balance progressive management with respect and empathy, always striving for the unity, democracy, and progress of our Association.

Strategic Priorities for 2025-2028

Drawing from the participatory work of recent years and responding to the needs expressed by our members, we identify the following strategic priorities that will guide our work in the coming mandate:

1. Navigating a World of New Walls: Defending the Freedom of Knowledge Sharing

United beyond borders. Knowledge without walls.

We live in an era of multiplying conflicts and rising political and cultural barriers that threaten the very foundations upon which Cumulus was built. New walls - physical, political, digital, and ideological - increasingly limit the mobility of students and researchers around the world, restricting their ability to cross borders, collaborate freely, and share knowledge without constraint.
These developments challenge the fundamental premise of our association: that design education thrives in an open, international environment where schools and universities can network freely, where knowledge flows across borders without impediment, and where dialogue transcends national boundaries and political divisions. Cumulus was founded on the belief that design education benefits from global exchange, that innovation emerges from diverse perspectives meeting on common ground, and that the future of our field depends on maintaining spaces where ideas can circulate freely.
Yet today, visa restrictions tighten, travel becomes more complicated, academic exchanges face new bureaucratic hurdles, and geopolitical tensions create hesitation where there should be enthusiasm for international collaboration.
For some of our members and their students, participating in international conferences, research projects, or exchange programs has become difficult or impossible—not due to lack of interest or resources, but because of political circumstances beyond their control.

Cumulus must respond to this moment by:

- **reaffirming our commitment to being a truly international space** that transcends political divisions, maintaining our identity as an association where all members are welcome regardless of their government's political positions or international conflicts;
- **defending the principle of free knowledge sharing** as essential to design education's vitality, advocating for policies that facilitate rather than restrict

academic mobility and international collaboration;
- **creating alternative pathways for participation** when physical mobility is constrained, ensuring that political barriers do not exclude members or their students from our community;
- **building bridges across divides** through design education and research, demonstrating that shared commitment to improving lives through design can unite people even when their nations are in conflict;
- **supporting members affected by political circumstances** through solidarity, practical assistance, and ensuring their voices remain heard within our network.

  In this context, Cumulus should continue to play its role in service of design education systems worldwide, creating spaces for knowledge sharing, facilitating dialogue across differences, and ensuring that design educators and students can connect, collaborate, and learn from one another regardless of political circumstances. Our mission is to maintain the conditions necessary for international design education to flourish.

The coming three years will test our diplomatic skills, our capacity for inclusive dialogue, and our commitment to maintaining unity across difference. We need to prove that design education can model a different way of engaging across borders - one based on mutual respect, shared purpose, and the conviction that our field advances when knowledge flows freely and diverse perspectives meet in dialogue.

2. Values and Identity: The Cumulus Design Declaration as Living Document

Many voices. Shared values. One declaration.

The Kyoto Design Declaration, drafted by Cumulus founder Yrjö Sotamaa in 2008, has served for years as a pillar articulating our association's founding values. It proclaimed that "human-centered design thinking, when rooted in universal and sustainable principles, has the power to fundamentally improve our world"—a vision that continues to inspire our work.

Building on this foundation, during the 2022-2025 mandate we engaged our entire global community in an unprecedented participatory co-design process to create the **Cumulus Design Declaration** - a renewed articulation of our values that addresses contemporary challenges while honoring our heritage. Through workshops, consultations, and collaborative sessions across conferences and regions, members from all parts of the world contributed to reimagining our guiding principles for an era of ecological transition, societal regeneration, technological transformation, and the urgent need for peace building.

The Cumulus Design Declaration represents more than an update of foundational text - it is the product of collective wisdom, reflecting diverse cultural perspectives while maintaining our commitment to universal principles.

Through the next three years, we will:

- **disseminate the Cumulus Design Declaration** through a series of translation workshops organized within Cumulus Regional Meetings, bringing together members who share linguistic and cultural contexts to engage deeply with the Declaration's principles in their own languages;
- **adopt a dex-colonial approach** to these translation workshops, recognizing that design values and priorities may be articulated differently across cultures and that meaningful translation requires more than linguistic conversion - it demands cultural interpretation, local contextualization, and respect for diverse ways of understanding design's role in society;
- **organize Regional Meetings that unite countries and places** through shared languages and cultural affinities (for example, bringing together all Spanish-speaking or Portuguese-speaking regions around the globe) to facilitate rich dialogue about how the Declaration's principles resonate in different contexts;
- **create opportunities for deep dialogue** around the Declaration's themes related to the design's role in addressing contemporary challenges: planet-centered development, sustainability, togetherness, plurality and changing technologies;
- **use the Declaration as a framework** for evaluating and developing new Cumulus initiatives, ensuring that our programs and partnerships align with our stated values and serve as expressions of the principles we collectively endorse.

This work of translation and dissemination is not merely technical or administrative—it is an ongoing conversation about what we value, what we aspire to achieve through design education, and how we can maintain unity around shared principles while respecting the plurality of perspectives within our global community.

3. A Student-Centered Association

Students first. Future forward.

Students are not merely the beneficiaries of design education—they are active agents in shaping its future. Our commitment to placing students at the center of the Cumulus experience will be realized through:

- **expanding the Cumulus Talent Camp** to reach more students from diverse

geographic and institutional contexts, creating intensive experiences that connect emerging designers across borders and build lasting networks;
- **developing the Cumulus Green Competition** as a platform for student innovation on sustainability development goals, showcasing how the next generation approaches ecological and social design with fresh perspectives;
- **strengthening the Cumulus PhD Network** to support doctoral students and early-career researchers, facilitating knowledge sharing between current and future doctoral programs, creating mentorship opportunities, and addressing the particular challenges of PhD education in design;
- **amplifying student voices** in Cumulus governance and programming, ensuring that student perspectives inform our strategic decisions and that students see Cumulus as truly their association.
- **supporting and expanding the CirroCumulus Working Group** as a student-led community of practice where design students worldwide connect, share research, and explore timely topics together. Led by student ambassadors and meeting regularly at Cumulus conferences, CirroCumulus creates space for young designers to engage in dialogue about design education's future, collaborate on projects, and build the peer networks that will sustain their careers and advance the field.

4. Organizational Transition: Becoming a Truly Independent Organization

Independent yet connected. Preserve the legacy.

The transfer of business from Aalto University marked a crucial milestone, but true organizational independence requires ongoing attention to governance, capacity, and sustainability.

Our priorities include:
- **finalizing and implementing robust HR policies** that support our Secretariat staff as valued members of an independent organization, ensuring fair employment practices, professional development opportunities, and work environments that allow them to serve our members excellently;
- **strengthening financial governance and transparency** through regular budget updates, quarterly financial reporting, and careful stewardship of resources that ensures the long-term sustainability of the association;
- **completing essential insurance and liability coverage** for Board members and President, recognizing the new liability and responsibilities that come with independence;
- **developing organizational capacity** to manage the complexity of a truly

global association with diverse programs, partnerships, and initiatives;
- **maintaining and nurturing our relationship with Aalto University** as our historical home while operating with full autonomy and responsibility.

5. Diversified Services and Opportunities for All Members

Every member matters. Sharing is caring.

A key lesson from our participatory co-design process is that our members have vastly different capacities, resources, and needs. The diversity that makes Cumulus rich also presents challenges: some institutions can easily host major international conferences and send multiple faculty members and students abroad; others struggle with limited budgets, restrictive visa regimes, or institutional constraints that make international participation difficult. Our commitment to equity and inclusion demands that we create multiple pathways for meaningful engagement rather than a one-size-fits-all model.
Beyond our traditional biennial conferences, we must create differentiated formats that balance large gatherings (which showcase the scale and diversity of our network) with smaller, more focused meetings, workshops, and seminars that allow for deeper engagement, skill development, and relationship building. This diversification of initiatives ensures that members can engage with Cumulus in ways that match their capacities and needs.
The Cumulus Regional Meetings represent a crucial innovation in this regard - bringing internationalization closer to home, allowing members to connect with peers in their geographic, linguistic, or cultural region without the barriers of long-distance travel, complex visas, or prohibitive costs. These gatherings create opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and community building that might otherwise not exist, particularly for institutions in regions where international mobility faces the greatest obstacles.

Through the coming mandate, we will:
- **expand and systematize Cumulus Regional Meetings** as a core program, establishing regular gatherings organized around linguistic and cultural affinities (Spanish-speaking or Portuguese-speaking regions, Francophone networks, etc.) as well as geographic proximity (Mediterranean or Northern regions);
- **ensure hybrid participation in all Cumulus conferences and major events**, integrating online participation options that allow members who cannot travel—due to financial constraints, visa difficulties, health reasons, or

other barriers—to engage meaningfully with presentations, discussions, and networking opportunities;
- **support underserved design communities** around the world by actively working to reduce barriers to participation, providing targeted assistance to institutions with limited resources, and ensuring that Cumulus membership offers tangible value regardless of institutional capacity;
- **develop strategic partnerships and MOUs** that open doors for collaborative projects between members, facilitating research collaborations, student and faculty exchanges, and shared initiatives that benefit institutions that might not have international connections otherwise;
- **enhance Working Group activities** that provide structured frameworks for members to collaborate on specific themes or challenges, generating outputs—publications, toolkits, best practices, case studies—that benefit the wider design education community;
- **provide research support and capacity building**, assisting members in developing successful research proposals, accessing funding opportunities, and establishing international collaborations that strengthen their institutional research capacity.

This approach recognizes that true inclusivity requires intentional design: we must create multiple entry points, diverse formats, and varied levels of engagement that allow every member institution - regardless of size, resources, or geographic location - to find their place in the Cumulus network and benefit from membership.

6. Communication: Staying Connected and Feeling Close

Stay connected. Stay close. Stay inspired.

In a global association spanning 69 countries, communication is not merely operational, it is the thread that holds our community together.

We commit to:
- **regular, engaging communication** through newsletters, social media, and our website that keeps members informed, celebrates achievements across our network, and maintains a sense of community between major events;
- **website development and maintenance** that ensures our digital home is current, functional, and reflects the vitality of our activities, with dedicated pages for all initiatives, projects, and programs;

- **improved collaboration** between Secretariat, President, and Board to ensure timely, accurate, and inspiring communications that reach all members;
- **multiple channels and formats** that recognize different communication preferences and ensure that language is not a barrier to feeling included;
- **showcasing member work and achievements**, helping to raise the visibility of our institutions and their contributions to design education globally.

7. Conferences Reimagined for a Post-Pandemic World

Sharing the Space of Knowledge.

Our conferences remain the heartbeat of Cumulus—moments of gathering, celebration, knowledge exchange, and community building. We will continue to shape conference formats that:

- **balance scale with intimacy**, maintaining the energy of large gatherings while creating spaces for meaningful connection and dialogue;
- **integrate online and in-person participation** thoughtfully, not as a compromise but as an intentional design that expands access;
- **reflect our values**, modeling sustainability, inclusion, and design excellence in how conferences are organized and experienced;
- **create opportunities for student participation**, ensuring that conferences are accessible and welcoming to emerging designers;
- **support conference hosts** with frameworks, resources, and guidance that reduce burden while allowing for local creativity and innovation.

8. Editorial Strategy and Knowledge Dissemination

Excellence in research. Impact through knowledge.

Design knowledge should flow freely across our network. We will:

- **elevate the scientific quality of Cumulus Conference Proceedings** by working toward higher academic rankings and indexing, implementing more rigorous peer review processes, and strengthening editorial standards. Achieving higher rankings in academic databases will better serve our researchers worldwide, supporting their career advancement and ensuring that the intellectual work produced through Cumulus conferences receives the recognition it deserves within the broader academic community;
- **boost publication activity** related to Cumulus conferences and initiatives,

ensuring that the intellectual output of our community is documented and accessible
- **develop editorial partnerships** that increase the reach and impact of design education research;
- **support open access** publishing where possible, recognizing that knowledge generated within our community should benefit the widest possible audience;
- **create new formats** for sharing knowledge beyond traditional academic publications, embracing multimedia, digital platforms, and formats that reach diverse audiences.

9. Strategic Growth and Financial Health

Grow equitably. Include universally. Act transparently.

Sustainable growth requires attention to both expansion and consolidation, but also to ensuring that financial structures support rather than hinder inclusivity:

- **implementing an equity-based financial model** that ensures meaningful involvement from all regions, recognizing that true internationalization requires more than geographic diversity: it demands that institutions from all contexts can participate fully regardless of their economic capacity;
- **strategic membership development** that prioritizes quality of engagement over quantity, while actively working to include regions and institution types currently underrepresented in our network, ensuring that growth strengthens rather than dilutes our community;
- **enhanced partnership strategy** focusing on impactful collaborations with international associations, industry partners, and funding bodies that align with our values and serve our members' interests, generating resources that can be invested in expanding access and opportunity;
- **improved membership fee collection and sponsor engagement** through clear communication about how contributions support association activities, combined with flexible payment arrangements that acknowledge different institutional realities;
- **transparent financial management** that builds trust and allows members to understand how their contributions support the association's work, with regular reporting on both income and expenditure aligned with strategic priorities.

Working Together: The Path Forward

The strategic priorities outlined here are ambitious, but they are grounded in work already begun and in the demonstrated capacity of our community to achieve remarkable targets when we work together. They build on the momentum of recent years while responding to the urgent needs of our changing world.

Each mandate brings its own character. The coming three years will be defined by our commitment to remaining united across differences, to maintaining our identity as an international association in a fragmenting world, and to ensuring that design education plays its crucial role in addressing the ecological, social, and technological challenges of our time.

This requires acknowledging complexity and navigating it with care. It means balancing the immediate needs of organizational management with the longer-term work of cultural transformation. It demands that we operate with transparency, involve members in decision-making, and remain accountable to the values we espouse.

The Cumulus Executive Board IX, together with the President and Secretary General, commits to this work while acknowledging that we cannot do it alone. Every achievement of Cumulus reflects the collective effort of member institutions, faculty, students, and the dedicated professionals who serve our association. We invite every member to find their place in this unfolding story, whether through Working Groups, Regional Meetings, conferences, competitions, collaborative projects, or simply by staying connected and contributing with their voice to our ongoing conversation.

Gratitude and Commitment

As we embark on this new mandate, we express deep gratitude to all who have brought Cumulus to this moment: our founders whose vision created this extraordinary network; past presidents and boards who stewarded its growth; the Secretary General and Secretariat staff who work tirelessly behind the scenes; and most importantly, the member institutions and individuals across the world who have placed their trust in Cumulus and who continuously contribute energy, ideas, and commitment to our shared project.

The richness of our Association stands in the plurality and diversity of its members, spanning from large to small educational institutions, from public to private, from Universities to Colleges, Academies, and Schools of Art, Design and Media. This diversity is our strength. It is what allows us to truly represent

the global landscape of design education, to learn from one another, and to collectively shape a future where design serves humanity at its best.
We approach the work ahead with humility, knowing that challenges will emerge that we cannot now predict, and with confidence, knowing that our community has repeatedly demonstrated its resilience, creativity, and capacity for collaboration. Together, we will navigate the complexities of our time while holding fast to the values that unite us: belief in design's power to improve lives, commitment to education as a force for positive change, respect for cultural diversity, dedication to sustainability and justice, and faith in the power of dialogue and cooperation across borders.

The next three years will be important for the overall future of our association. Let us work together, with care, with ambition, with respect for one another, and with unwavering commitment to the shared vision that brings us together in Cumulus.

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President, Cumulus Association

and the Cumulus Executive Board IX
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