Field Guide (April 2025)

CIRCULAR: Rules & Relationships

Co-creating civic networks that actuate forest ecologies as both subject and practice

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Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other. No matter how difficult it is…life is good when you are happy; but much better when others are happy because of you.

~ Adapted from a Sanskrit proverb ("Paropakārāya phalanti vṛkṣāḥ …"), author unknown. Widely, but mistakenly, attributed to Pope Francis.

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Introduction

Welcome to CIRCULAR, a framework that transforms individual projects into interconnected ecosystems by mirroring the organic growth of forests. Just as trees form mutual support networks through their root systems, CIRCULAR cultivates communities through invitation-based circles that expand naturally through trust and shared purpose.

The beauty of CIRCULAR lies in its hyperdiverse nature. While only artists can initiate circles, they may invite scientists, critical theorists, activists, or anyone they believe can bring a field to life. What matters isn't professional credentials but the ability to contribute meaningfully to our collective exploration of forest ecologies as both subject and practice.

This field guide provides the complete framework for understanding, participating in, and implementing CIRCULAR. Whether you're an artist looking to start a circle, a participant responding to an invitation, or an organisation considering partnership, you'll find clear guidance for engagement as we build from foundational concepts through to practical implementation. While the framework typically operates with twelve fields created by three themes and four approaches, its adaptable structure can expand to accommodate more themes when contexts demand additional complexity.

Together, we create civic networks where art, science, theory, and activism intersect – and where the principles of forest ecology teach us new ways of working together.

1.00 Roles & Relationships

1.10 The Democracy School

Role: Framework provider and institutional partner

Responsibilities:

- Maintain the CIRCULAR concept and methodology
- Provide documentation and guidance
- Partner with local organisations to implement CIRCULAR
- Support contextual adaptation
- Offer optional consultancy services

Rights:

- Rights to the CIRCULAR framework
- Concept originator recognition
- Quality assurance oversight
- Documentation and research usage

1.20 Circle Participants

Role: All participants function as both contributors and hosts

Responsibilities:

- Confirm circle membership by extending an invitation
- Honour all accepted CIRCULAR invitations
- Develop projects aligned with assigned field
- Facilitate invited participants
- Contribute to community support
- Respect seasonal timeline

Rights:

- Full creative autonomy for own project
- Disciplinary freedom within field parameters
- Multiple circle participation
- Equal access to support systems
- Fair documentation representation

1.30 Local Partners

Role: Organisations partnering with the Democracy School to implement CIRCULAR

Responsibilities:

- Collaborate with Democracy School
- Set timelines and parameters
- Provide shared infrastructure and resources
- Support documentation and promotion
- Coordinate public programming

Rights:

- Contextual adaptation of thematic matrix
- Programme integration
- Brand association
- Documentation usage

1.40 Circle Initiators

Artists who start circles have identical rights and responsibilities to other participants, with two specific distinctions:

- They start the invitation chain
- They must accept whatever field is assigned when the circle closes, except for premature closures. In that case they can pick any open field.

In consultation with other participants, initiators may optionally take on coordination roles, but this varies by circle and grants no additional rights.

2.00 Core Principles

2.10 The Pull-Based System

CIRCULAR operates through an invitation-based system where participants are assigned to specific fields rather than choosing their own. While only artists can initiate circles, they may invite anyone they deem relevant, regardless of professional designation. This pull-based approach ensures organic, curated growth, with selection focused on each participant's ability to bring their assigned field to life rather than their formal credentials.

2.20 Mutuality and Reciprocity

Participation in CIRCULAR requires inviting another person, establishing a relationship of mutual obligation. Invitors facilitate their invitees through the process according to mutually agreed terms, while invitees commit to delivering their projects as agreed. This reciprocal arrangement ensures all participants have equal status and autonomy within the network.

2.30 No Self-Selection

Each invitation creates a bond of trust and responsibility, with participants placed in fields by their invitors rather than choosing their own positions. This prevents opportunistic positioning and ensures thoughtful curation of the network's composition.

2.40 Equal Autonomy

CIRCULAR maintains strict equality among participants, with no hierarchical relationships established between them. Each person enjoys full creative freedom within their field while maintaining disciplinary autonomy within the thematic boundaries of their assignment.

3.00 The Matrix Structure

3.10 Overview of the Twelve Fields

The matrix typically creates twelve unique positions at the intersection of three themes and four approaches, forming a comprehensive framework for exploring forest ecologies through diverse perspectives. Where complex contexts require additional dimensions the matrix structure can be adapted to accommodate additional themes.

3.20 Thematic Dimensions (Context-Specific)

The thematic fields adapt to each implementation's specific context and needs. In partnered implementations, local partners define these themes, while in self-organised initiatives they are adapted by the circle initiators themselves. Three themes tend to work well in most cases – typically addressing current societal concerns, future-oriented challenges, and transformative possibilities relevant to the local context. Whilst experience shows that three themes provide a good balance between comprehensiveness and manageability, the framework can accommodate additional themes when necessary to capture particularly complex contexts.

3.30 Methodological Approaches (Core Structure)

Four consistent methodological approaches form the matrix columns:

1. **Local Community Engagement**: Active involvement of local communities
2. **Knowledge-Spreading Objectives**: Educational dimensions and information sharing
3. **Local Collaboration**: Partnerships with non-art organisations
4. **Public Programmes**: Extended engagement beyond singular events

3.40 Field Assignments and Interpretation

Each field represents a unique intersection of theme and method, requiring participants to develop projects that honour both dimensions. While participants must work within their assigned thematic boundaries, creative interpretation is encouraged, and the specific parameters of each intersection allow for disciplinary autonomy in approach and execution.

4.00 Circle Dynamics

4.10 Starting a Circle

Circles begin when an artist extends the first invitation, setting the process in motion. Only artists can initiate circles, and as initiators they must be prepared to occupy any field within the matrix once the circle closes. Multiple circles can exist simultaneously, creating opportunities for cross-pollination and network formation.

4.20 The Invitation Chain

1. Consider the field's requirements carefully
2. Select someone whose practice aligns with these needs
3. Extend the invitation with clarity about commitments
4. Allow time for consideration
5. Document acceptance formally
6. Agree on mutual facilitation terms

4.30 Cross-Circle Participation

Participants may receive and accept multiple invitations, enriching the ecosystem through cross-disciplinary involvement. All accepted invitations must be honoured, and the resulting network benefits from the diverse perspectives brought by participants engaging across multiple circles.

4.40 Network Formation

As circles grow and interconnect, they form a root system similar to that found in forest ecologies. Ideas and resources flow naturally between circles and disciplines, collaborative opportunities emerge organically, and cross-disciplinary dialogue creates hyperdiverse ecosystems that mirror the complexity of natural systems. Just as the matrix framework can expand to accommodate additional themes when needed, these networks naturally adapt to address the specific challenges and opportunities present in each implementation, ensuring the framework remains responsive to local contexts.

5.00 Seasonal Cycles & Completion

5.10 The Four Seasons of CIRCULAR

Like forest ecosystems, CIRCULAR follows natural seasonal rhythms which align with local partner project cycles or self-organised timelines.

'Spring': Seeding and Growth

- Initial invitations
- Participants finding their patch

'Summer': Maturation

- Projects taking form
- Cross-pollination between circles

'Autumn': Harvest

- Circle completion
- Simultaneous activation

'Winter': Reflection

- Impact assessment
- Planning future iterations

5.20 Natural Closure Mechanisms

Circles reach their natural completion during the 'autumn' harvest phase, when the eleventh participant assigns the initiator to the final field. At this point, initiators must accept their assigned field, and all projects activate simultaneously at the

season's peak. For circles that remain incomplete at harvest time, the transition still occurs, with existing participants activating their projects as planned.

5.30 Alternative Pathways

CIRCULAR offers flexibility through multiple participation options. Participants can initiate new circles while honouring existing commitments, and engagement in multiple circles provides additional opportunities for creative expression. When participants struggle to find suitable invitees, online community assistance is available to help complete the invitation chain.

5.40 Circle Completion Protocols

Circles develop organically with participants joining at different times. Registration happens continuously as members join, and field assignments occur throughout the growth process. This creates a dynamic, non-linear formation pattern across the CIRCULAR network.

By 'autumn', all circles must reach completion. Complete circles finish naturally when the eleventh participant assigns the final field to the initiator. Incomplete circles are closed prematurely, with initiators selecting from remaining open fields.

This enables simultaneous activation of all projects, essential for coordinated events like festival programmes. Following activation, documentation and archiving of all projects takes place, concluding with self-evaluation and impact assessment during 'winter' reflection.

6.00 Support

6.10 Community Support

CIRCULAR provides various channels for participant communication and support. Participants can use online chat groups via Signal, Telegram, or WhatsApp for day-to-day interaction, while optional online meetings through Zoom or Teams offer opportunities for deeper discussion. Local partners also have access to a dedicated Democracy School hotline for additional support.

6.20 Registration and Transparency

The system maintains transparency through careful registration of all invitations, acceptances, and activations. Circle status information, member listings and contact details are accessible to all CIRCULAR stakeholders to facilitate communication between circle members, circles, the Democracy School and local partners.

6.30 Resource Sharing

The Democracy School provides essential resources including best practices for extending and accepting invitations, as well as comprehensive guidelines for project

documentation and archiving. These materials ensure consistency and quality across all circles while supporting participants in their roles.

6.40 Professional Support Upgrade*

For those requiring additional expertise, the Democracy School offers enhanced support services through:

- Implementation guidance for local partners
- Process coaching for circle initiators
- Collaborative methodology consultation
- Community engagement expertise

* Optional fee-based upgrade.

7.00 Implementation Models

7.10 Partnered Implementation

When local partners collaborate with the Democracy School, they determine context-specific thematic fields and align timelines with their institutional calendars. Partners provide shared infrastructure and resources while coordinating programme integration to ensure CIRCULAR fits seamlessly within their existing frameworks.

7.20 Self-Organised CIRCULAR

In the absence of local partners, circle initiators assume organisational functions that would typically be handled by institutions. They adapt the framework to local context, establish timelines for their circles, and may form steering groups when multiple circles collaborate. Optional coordination of an overall programme can emerge through consensus, though these organisational functions remain separate from participant roles and grant no additional rights within circles.

7.30 Hybrid Approaches

CIRCULAR's flexibility allows for various combinations of partnered and self-organised elements. Some implementations may feature partial institutional support, while others develop through multiple circles with mixed governance structures. This adaptability enables collaborative resource sharing and creates opportunities for diverse organisational models to emerge organically.

7.40 Adaptation Principles

CIRCULAR is designed to adapt naturally to each context. Whether implemented through partnerships or self-organised initiatives, the framework provides a flexible structure that responds to local needs while maintaining its core integrity.