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## Transition Design Provocation\*

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### Introduction: Why name a new approach to designing?

There is nothing new about the call for design to do more than cater to capitalist retail economies. Twentieth-century design was greatly influenced by the Bauhaus' modernist project of making a new 'man'; the Design Methods movement was inspired by the need for design to be more reliable in the face of increasingly complex problems; Sustainable Design aims to foster new lifestyles and economies (circular, access, sharing, support, etc.); Ecological, Regenerative, and Permaculture Design use nature as an analogue in the design process and work to integrate human and natural systems; Cradle to Cradle design works to eliminate industrial waste by treating all materials as 'nutrients.' There are also many individuals who have called for change within the field of design: John Chris Jones' *Redesigning Design*, Bruce Mau's *Massive Change*, John Thackara's *Xskool*, Tony Fry's *Redirective Practice*, Alastair Fuad-Luke's and Ann Thorpe's *Design Activism*, Ezio Manzini's *Changing the Change*, and now *DesignX*. etc.

Is there a need for another kind of designing that is connected to long horizons of time and visions of sustainable futures? How does Transition Design differ from other attempts to reorient design?

### What skill sets would be unique to the Transition Designer?

We believe that while many have called for design-led societal change, few have articulated how to undertake and lead/catalyze such change, nor have they identified the areas of knowledge and investigation required to do so. Although Transition Design is complementary to, and borrows from, myriad other design approaches, it is distinct in the following ways:

(1) Uses living systems theory as an approach to understanding/addressing wicked problems; (2) Designs solutions that protect and restore *both* social and natural ecosystems; (3) Sees everyday life/lifestyles as the most fundamental context for design; (4) Advocates place-based, globally networked solutions; (5) Designs solutions for varying horizons of

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time and multiple levels of scale; (6) Links existing solutions so that they become steps in a larger transition vision; (7) Amplifies emergent, grassroots solutions; (8) Bases solutions on maximizing satisfiers for the widest range of needs; (9) Sees the designer's own mindset/posture as an essential component of the design process; (10) Calls for the reintegration and recontextualization of diverse transdisciplinary knowledge.

The above points suggest multiple skill sets specific to transition design, e.g. the ability to devise solutions that integrate social and natural systems and to intervene sensitively in such systems; to devise solutions which take account of short, medium, and long horizons of time and all levels of scale of everyday life, and the ability to identify potentialities for transition in everyday life; the ability to design for the needs of particular groups of people in particular places. We are especially keen to develop this area with the help of other educators, practitioners, and researchers.

### **Why 'Transition'?**

Transition Design acknowledges that we are living in 'transitional times' and takes as its central premise the need for societal transitions to more sustainable futures and the belief that design has a key role to play in these transitions. The idea of and need for transition is central to a variety of current discourses concerned with how change manifests and can be initiated/directed (in ecosystems, organizations, communities/societies, economies, and even individuals). These approaches have inspired the use of the word 'transition' in our project. When applied to social systems, many of the approaches outlined below emphasize change/transition that is gradual or step-wise rather than decisive and revolutionary. As yet, most of these are unrelated to each other or to the field of design. We believe new ways of designing need to be informed by knowledge outside design (science, philosophy, psychology, social science, anthropology, and the humanities etc.) in order to gain a deeper understanding of how to design for change/transition in complex systems.

Currently there is a gap between these discourses and the practice of design. How can we leverage these theoretical frameworks to inform design and how can they, in turn, be enriched through design? What additional theories of change might be helpful to Transition Design and from how 'far afield' should we be looking for such theories?

We have been focusing on bringing together several discourses relating to transition, including the following:

#### ***Complex/living systems transitions***

Transition is a fundamental concept in ecology and speaks to the changes that occur as complex ecosystems sustain themselves over long periods of time (such as succession). Healthy ecosystems comprise complex webs of reciprocal relationship and interdependence between living organisms and their environment. When these complex, open systems undergo external stresses or 'perturbations' from their environment, they can display 'emergent properties' and transition to unexpected and unpredictable new forms of behavior and structure.

By corollary, Transition Design incorporates living systems literacy in order to prepare designers for work within complex social systems and enable them to leverage the potential of self-organization, interdependence, and emergence.

### ***Sustainability transitions research***

Originating in Northern Europe within the academic fields of Innovation Management and Technology Assessment, this research focuses on understanding how societal transitions happen and how they can be directed toward sustainable development. These approaches were used as practical tools by the Dutch Government to manage the radical transformation of the energy systems in the early 2000s. These theories represent the convergence of sustainable development research, technology forecasting, social ecological impact analysis, and the fields of social history and construction of technology. Researchers study the co-evolution of technologies and their uses in order to conceive how innovations can be introduced into society to enable new ways of living and working.

By corollary, Transition Design should be based upon a deep understanding of the social history of technology, and a post-planning approach to how the introductions of new technologies impact society and vice versa.

### ***Transition towns***

This international network of communities seeks to build resilience in response to peak oil and climate change and the vagaries of the globalized economy. Founded in the UK in 2006, it is a self-organizing, grassroots movement of hundreds of communities working together worldwide to make a managed transition to more sustainable futures. The movement is characterized by local, place-based initiatives (such as the development of local currencies) aimed at making towns and communities more self-reliant and resilient.

By corollary, Transition Design involves a type of social engagement and community organizing that goes deeper and beyond co-design and participatory design, and situates projects and initiatives within the context of long-term visions for specific places and ecosystems.

### ***Transitioning economies***

There are myriad efforts underway in both the developed and developing world to intentionally transition economies. The problematic twentieth-century economic modernization/development efforts by North Atlantic-based institutions like the World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO) are now being appropriated by ascendant nations such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and The Global South. Transitioning economies involves the development of systems-level change strategies (the creation of markets, infrastructure development, adoption of new lifestyles etc.). It also raises questions about how to transition two fundamentally different kinds of economies, i.e. the late capitalist liberal democracies (which have mature design professions in which transition design can take root) and emergent economies (which have the potential to leapfrog many of the problems facing the West).

By corollary, Transition Design needs to be an approach that is useful to both developed and developing economies and should enable the latter to transcend/bypass the socially and ecologically destructive economic development pathways of the West.

### **Organizational transition**

Transition Management and organizational change refer to the ways in which change (such as leadership succession) and transition within social organizations is managed. This approach to change management acknowledges that many factors are involved in successful organizational/institutional transitions: the psychology of groups and individuals; the need to capture the wisdom and experience of those leaving the organization; workspaces and workflow communications; tools and infrastructure, are all involved in holistic transitions.

By corollary, Transition Design acknowledges that organizations are composed of people and that their practices, habits, and expectations are the basis for structural change. This calls for designers to develop a deep understanding of the dynamics of social change and suggests an approach that incorporates many aspects of service design.

### **Personal transitions**

The term 'transition' is also used to refer to personal change, especially physiological change. These changes can be intentional, e.g. gender reassignment, or unintentional, e.g. aging or illness. Design has been directly associated with many of the latter types of transitions, especially in John Zimmerman or Kursat Ozenc's work on *Designing for Self*, an approach that has received much attention with respect to sensor technology, especially wearables. Thus far, these initiatives have primarily remained at the level of individual change; however, sustainable designers have begun to experiment with the potential for group transition afforded by performance data being shared through social media.

By corollary, Transition Design has the potential to aid in group/societal transitions by leveraging new sensing/digital technologies.

### **Great Transitions network**

The term 'Great Transition' was first used in 1964 by the economist and systems theorist Kenneth Boulding, who argued that the economy was part of an interconnected, planetary system that has social, spiritual, and ecological dimensions. In 1995, the Global Scenario Group (convened by the Tellus Institute and The Stockholm Environment Institute) began to produce a series of reports that identified multiple future-based planetary scenarios. They also identified strategies, values, and leverage points for change that could lead to the 'Great Transition,' i.e. improved quality of life, reduced poverty and inequity, human solidarity, enriched cultures, and protection of the biosphere. Within the last decade, the Tellus Institute has launched the Great Transition Initiative (GTI). GTI is an international network of more than 400 scholars and activists from over 40 countries who seek to develop and mobilize a planet-wide citizens' transition movement. The concept of the 'Great Transition' has also been adopted by several leading think tanks, such as the New Economics Foundation in London.

By corollary, Transition Design should develop future based scenarios and the means/tools by which local communities can transition toward these, within a planetary context.

## The Transition Design Framework

Transition Design uses a heuristic model (Figure 1) to characterize four different but interrelated and mutually influencing areas: (1) vision; (2) theories of change; (3) mindset/posture; and (4) new ways of designing. We welcome suggestions on how to refine, expand, or evolve the framework and its four sections.

# TRANSITION DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Four mutually reinforcing and co-evolving areas of knowledge, action and self-reflection

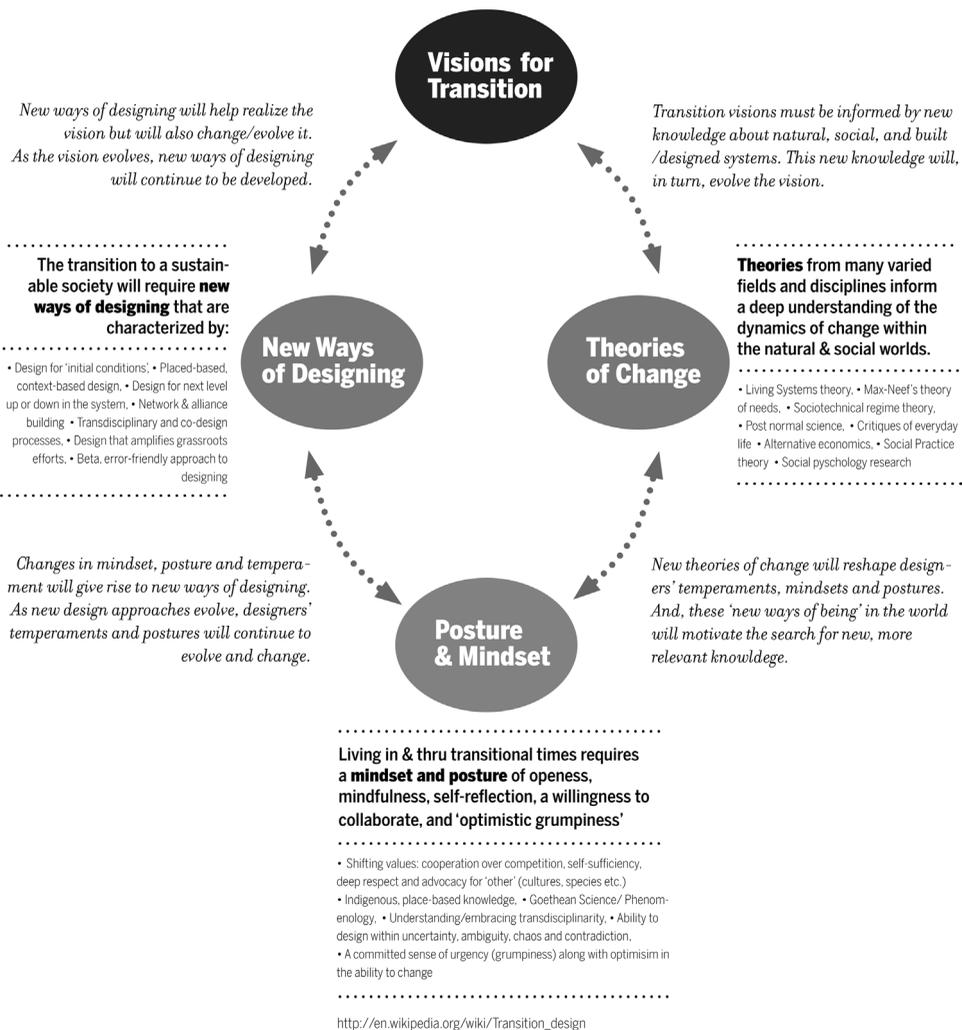


Figure 1.

## Visioning

Transition Design proposes that more compelling future-oriented visions are needed to inform and inspire projects in the present and that the tools and methods of design can aid in the development of these visions. Tonkinwise (2014, 14) argues for ‘motivating visions as well as visions that can serve as measures against which to evaluate design moves, but visions that are also modifiable according to the changing situation.’ Dunne and Raby (2013) argue that visioning creates spaces for discussion and debate about alternative futures and new ways of being. It requires us to suspend disbelief and forget how things are now and wonder about how things could be.

Transition Design proposes the development of future visions that are dynamic and grassroots based, that emerge from local conditions versus a one-size-fits-all process, and that remain open-ended and speculative. This type of visioning is a circular, iterative, and error-friendly process used to envision radically new ideas for the future that serve to inform even small, modest solutions in the present. Visions of sustainable futures can provide a means through which contemporary lifestyles and design interventions can be assessed and critiqued against a desired future state and can inform small design decisions in the present (Margolin, 2007).

Various design approaches have diversified our ability to imagine the future and inspire short, mid- and long-term solutions. Examples include *Speculative Everything* (Dunne and Raby 2013) and backcasting and scenario based initiatives such as Manzini and Jégou’s *Sustainable Everyday* (2003) and Jonathon Porritt’s *The World We Made* (2013).

How can Transition Design avoid the modernist pitfall of the imposition of static images of a rigid future? What is the process for developing dynamic/constantly evolving visions of the future that can inform design in the present? What other concepts and streams of thought can inform the content of Transition visioning? We have started with Cosmopolitan Localism, a concept developed by Sachs, Manzini et al. (Manzini 2009; Sachs 1999).

Visions can aid transition by providing a means through which contemporary lifestyles and transition design interventions can be assessed, evaluated, and critiqued in terms of how we are tracking toward a desired state. How should Transition Design interventions be evaluated? What are the indicators that a future-based vision is opening up possibilities in the present for design initiatives/interventions?

## Theories of Change

Never in history has the need for change been more urgent (Max-Neef and Smith 2011). Yet, transformational societal change will depend upon our ability to change our ideas about change itself – how it manifests and how it can be catalyzed and directed. Systems-level, ongoing societal change is inherently transdisciplinary – it must be informed by ideas, theories, and methodologies from many varied fields and disciplines. Theories of Change is a key area within the Transition Design Framework for three important reasons: (1) A theory of change is always present within a planned/designed course of action, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not; (2) Transition to sustainable futures will require sweeping change at every level of our society; (3) Our conventional, outmoded and seemingly intuitive ideas about change lie at the root of many wicked problems (Escobar 2011; Irwin 2011; Scott 1999).

The Theories of Change section of the Framework is a fluid, evolving body of knowledge and ideas, often from outside design, whose objective is to provide designers with new tools and methodologies to initiate and catalyze transitions toward more sustainable futures. We have identified several approaches, such as Socio-Technical Regime Theory, Post-Normal Science, Social Practice Theory, Human Scale Development, Social Ecology, Social Psychology, and Critique of Everyday Life, amongst others, that are relevant to Transition Design.

Of particular relevance is a new, transdisciplinary body of knowledge, Living Systems/Complexity theory that explains the dynamics of change within complex systems and challenges our current paradigms and assumptions. These ideas have the potential to inform new approaches to design and problem solving. Ideas and discoveries from a diversity of fields such as physics, biology, sociology, and organizational development have revealed that change within open, complex systems such as social organizations and ecosystems manifests in counter-intuitive ways. Although change within such systems can be catalyzed and even gently directed, it cannot be managed or controlled, nor can outcomes be accurately predicted (Briggs and Peat 1990; Capra and Luisi 2014; Meadows 2008; Priogogine and Stengers 1994; Wheatley 2006).

Are there other theories and approaches relevant to Transition Design? How can design/designers contribute to these approaches to social, economic, political, and environmental change?

### ***Posture and mindset***

Living in and through transitional times calls for self-reflection and new ways of 'being' in the world. Fundamental change is often the result of a shift in mindset or worldview that leads to different ways of interacting with others. Our individual and collective mindsets represent the beliefs, values, assumptions, and expectations formed by our individual experiences, cultural norms, religious and spiritual beliefs, and the socio-economic and political paradigms to which we subscribe (Capra 1997; Clarke 2002; Kearney 1984). Designers' mindsets and postures often go unnoticed and unacknowledged, but they profoundly influence what is identified as a problem and how it is framed and solved within a given context. Transition Design asks designers to examine their own value system and the role it plays in the design process, and argues that solutions will be best conceived within a more holistic worldview that informs more collaborative and responsible postures for interaction. Transition Design examines the phenomenon of mindset and worldview and its connection to wicked problems (Capra and Luisi 2014; Kearney 1984; Linderman 2012; Tarnas 2010; Irwin 2011).

How do we educate designers for these new postures and temperaments? How do we sustain Transition Designers through life stages in the face of competing pressures from conventional organizations for more conservative creative class workers?

### ***New ways of designing***

The transition to a sustainable society will require design approaches informed by new and different value sets and knowledge. Transition Designers see themselves as agents of change and are ambitious in their desire to transform systems. They understand how to work iteratively, at multiple levels of scale, and over long horizons of time. Because transition designers develop visions of the 'long now' (Brand 1999), they take a decidedly different approach

to problem solving in the present. Transition Designers learn to see and solve for wicked problems and view a single design or solution as a single step in a longer transition toward a future-based vision. Some solutions have intentionally short life-spans and are designed to become obsolete as steps toward a longer-term goal. Other solutions are designed to change/evolve over long periods of time. Transition Designers look for ‘emergent possibilities’ within problem contexts, as opposed to imposing pre-planned and fully resolved solutions upon a situation. This way of designing must be informed by a deep understanding of local eco-systems and culture.

Transition Designers work in three broad areas: (1) They develop powerful narratives and visions of the future or the ‘not yet’ (Bloch 1995; de Sousa Santos 2006); (2) They amplify and connect grassroots efforts and projects undertaken by local communities and organizations (Manzini 2007, 2015; Penin 2013). For example, service design or social innovation solutions can be viewed as steps within longer-term transition solutions; (3) They work in transdisciplinary teams to design new, innovative, and place-based solutions rooted in and guided by transition visions. Although we consider Transition Design to be a distinctive way of designing, it is complementary to other design approaches such as design for service and design for social innovation.

Are there other relevant design approaches or methodologies that can contribute to transition solutions? How can existing solutions be recast within the context of Transition Design to become steps within a longer-term transition toward a sustainable future/outcome?

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