Transition Design: the need to refuse discipline and transcend instrumentalism

Anne-Marie Willis

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Transition Design: the need to refuse discipline and transcend instrumentalism

Anne-Marie Willis

Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts, German University in Cairo, New Cairo City, Cairo, Egypt

According to Arturo Escobar (2013), I am an epistemological colonist. I teach Design Theory in English to Egyptian students at a private university in Cairo that has the mission of propagating German scientific thinking to the elites of Egypt.

At this university, science is king, economic development the goal, and design is the icing on the cake. Design is branding, logos, styling, decoration. Design is about making our lives easier, more convenient, perfect functionality. Design is being creative, thinking-outside-the-box, expressing my creativity, finding solutions to problems. Such are the clichés repeated by the students, thus demonstrating their successful colonization.

Yet much is different here in this edge-city university in the midst of the semi-built, crumbling faux grandeur of New Cairo blending into desert where it is impossible to discern whether sand hills have been formed by wind or earth-moving equipment. Zooming out, as it were, looking at the Greater Cairo that is traversed daily by staff and students in the university's own bus fleet; here we see improvised design, a permanent state of unfinished-ness in which the ancient and crumbling can barely be distinguished from the new, half-built, the abandoned, and the late twentieth century crumbling infrastructure of appalling roads, fortified government buildings, and military installations. Scattered across this functionally and visually incoherent urban fabric you can also find securitized, manicured oases of privilege: the upmarket sporting clubs, shopping malls, and villa compounds. I could continue. I could also evoke other vast differences of language, gender roles, class structure, systems of belief, political culture, and much else. What is relevant, however, is that despite all these differences many of the problems of teaching and learning, of (mis)perceptions of design and of global challenges, are as present here as in Pittsburgh, New York, Cologne, Hong Kong, or Melbourne.

So, I have positioned myself. Now I will put forward some very frank first impressions of Transition Design, followed up by some attempts at constructive criticism.

Critical observations

On first reading the Transition Design *Provocation* (Irwin 2014) and associated papers, I could not see the point of this new naming and new program. Certainly the papers present logical

---

arguments on the difference between Transition Design and similar genres of design; and it is hard to disagree with the need for fundamental change upon which TD is based, but what I read has the same feel as what is already around. The thinking is still stuck in familiar design rhetoric (like: 'finding solutions to problems'). It is still within the instrumental model of design. Therefore, my initial reaction is: Transition Design is too nice, too polite; it is reformist not revolutionary; it does not convey a sense of the crucial issues and problems. From what I have read, I cannot see and feel the depth, the embeddedness, of structural unsustainability. There is no acknowledgement of the heavy investments, not least psychological, in keeping things as they are; nor of the awesome challenge of the re-direction of material culture and practices by the re-direction of design and designing. The idea of 'grumpiness' (Tonkinwise 2015) goes some way toward this, but not enough. It does not capture the extent of divestments needed for a significant cultural shift toward Sustainment.

So I am skeptical about the potential of Transition Design as it is laid out so far.

Changing perspective, my second thought was to doubt the value of a PhD program as a change agent or a means of producing change agents. This is because a PhD nowadays is not so much to do with independent research to produce new knowledge as it is a professional requirement. The drift toward requiring a PhD in order to get even a junior teaching position has devalued the PhD and changed the mindset of candidates to regard a PhD as high-level training, as a mark of status, not an intellectual project. Maybe I am wrong; I am just reflecting here on my Australian and Egyptian experience of academia. Nevertheless, I still think there is a contradiction in putting together a highly defined PhD program in the hope that it will attract potential change agents. Is it not more likely that such people will define their own projects and look for knowledge wherever they can find it, rather than expecting to find a pre-packaged program that will transform them and their practice? There is a problem in branding and marketing a radical postgraduate program, a program intending, if it is serious, to dismantle the system. Now, of course, this contradiction is not particular to Transition Design. TD is operating in conditions of delimitation and diminishment, as is everyone in higher education. What differs, however, is the degree of awareness of this. Briefly, these are the conditions of delimitation. In stating them I am re-iterating the familiar, but maybe it has faded into the background, become totally taken-for-granted, and therefore no longer seen and felt.

Critical contexts

Problem 1 is the commodification of education which has been ongoing for more than 20 years, with universities competing for students, the proliferation of Masters and PhD programs, the marketplace atmosphere in which they are conceived of, developed, packaged, branded, and promoted. This is inseparable from undergraduate education, wherein students are treated as and thus learn to behave as customers – rating courses and professors on entertainment value or functionalist criteria which reduce to 'did the course deliver everything I need to get a good grade with as little effort on my part as possible?' or reflected in comments like 'the ideas are too difficult, please explain in plain, simple language' or a recent favorite of mine, 'the lectures didn't present the topics in enough detail, I had to go and do the reading to understand them', as if reading were an aberration.

Problem 2 is closely related – it is the instrumentalization of tertiary education, wherein universities exist just to supply the labor market with its needs for intellectual capital.

Instrumentalism goes further in design education, it totally permeates it. Theory is taught so it can be 'applied' to design tasks. Thus theories of culture and cultural difference are taken up as if their only purpose is to define target groups and enhance marketing strategies. Notwithstanding acknowledgement of tame and wicked problems and the inappropriateness of attempting to solve wicked problems as if they were tame (it is easy to pay lip-service to clichés), design students and discipline-specific design educators (product, graphic, and so on) get annoyed and frustrated when the complexity, difficulty, and deeply structural nature of problems of unsustainability are exposed to them, prompting defensive postures on the need to avoid over-thinking, analysis-paralysis, and the like. This gets articulated by a supervisor to a student in terms such as: it is all very good this background research on the social and environmental problems of this community, but you are a designer, you cannot solve these big problems, you need to need to work out what you can contribute as *a designer*.

Such advice propels the student back to delimited 'designing-in error', back to designed objects and images, outputted as craft-style objects or posters, apps, or websites (badged as 'an awareness campaign'). Thus the supervisors feel secure because they are still turning out Graphic or Product or Interaction Designers, their disciplines remain intact and their jobs secure. This pressure toward disciplinary conformity is now exacerbated by the more recent requirement when applying for a teaching position to provide a portfolio of work by students you have taught.

So, from just this brief registration of the problems of instrumentalism and commodification of higher education, leading to pressure to conform and pressure to maintain disciplines and practices-as-they-are, we can see that a radically new practice will be in *conflict* with all of this. Conflict is the missing figure in Transition Design. In this sense Transition Design is not sufficiently political. Here I make the necessary distinction between the political and politics.

What is in a name? The transitional figure

OK, let us go into more detail on the question of 'Why Transition Design?'. What is in a name? Is the strategy to name a new design movement, or to brand a new postgraduate degree, or to create a new discipline? Arturo Escobar's paper refers to 'transition discourses' that have emerged over the past decade, saying that most of these transition discourses share the contention that we 'need to step outside existing institutional and epistemic boundaries' if we want to envision the kinds of radical transitions needed. Yet the attempt to define Transition Design seems to go in the opposite direction, trying to precisely position Transition Design in relation to other disciplines/sub-disciplines of 'Design for Service' and 'Design for Social Innovation' (sometimes called Social Design), with Transition Design as a third way (Irwin 2015).

But are these really 'disciplines'? What do these terms mean? Not what they say. Social Design ('emergent discipline'). But all design is social. Service Design ('mature discipline') is too diverse and diffuse to be a discipline. The super-large service sector of advanced economies connects to design practice only in fragmentary way, drawing on the services of designers as needed. Service Design and Social Design are aspirational practices. They are descriptors circulating in design education, they are product badges; opportunistic, not very well-considered namings. Perhaps all new namings now are nothing but strategic and no longer part of the struggle to think the unthought, to think the genuinely, radical new.

What are some other ways to think transition?

Transition, as in-between; not one state or another; on the way to somewhere, as in transit lounge. Transition, as in dance, Tai Chi and other body disciplines, denoting a move to get from one position (posture) to another. Transition then, is not transformation, with its apocalyptic connotations. Transition is more neutral – neither good nor bad. Whereas transformation implies dramatic, significant change which could be good or bad, transition suggests a known present state and a defined future state. Transition Design then is intentional or managed change, it is within the Herbert Simon paradigm.

Theories of change

Let us look at how change is theorized in Transition Design. The *Provocation* (Irwin 2014) emphasizes 'areas of knowledge and investigation' needed to catalyze societal change, referring to 'living systems theory' for understanding wicked problems. But why this theory in particular? There is also reference to 'Socio-Technical Transition Management Theory' (what a mouthful!) which studies ' … how innovations can be introduced into society to enable new ways of living and working (Irwin 2015, 2).' This is naïve. Introduced into society? Innovations are unpredictable, they come from anywhere, they emerge, penetrate, invade. There is never a polite introduction to a homogenous thing called Society. The image in my mind conjured up by those words:

Society is at home, a comfortable home, but a bit boring. There is a knock at the door. Knock, knock.
'Who is there?'
'I am cell-phone. I would like to come in and tell you how I could make your life better.'
'OK, you can come in, but only if you behave yourself.'

The point here is that Transition Design needs to be based on a deeper understanding of the nature of technologies as formative of modes of being in the world. It needs to draw directly on Philosophy and Philosophy of Technology, rather than derivative theories from instrumental disciplines like Management.

In considering Theories of Change appropriate to the mission of Transition Design, I suggest that concern with design be backgrounded. Forget it – for the moment anyway.

There is a big difference between understanding the shaping power/determinate force of design from a philosophical perspective that is able to locate design practice as an historically constituted and delimited field of activity AND a superficial comprehension of the power of design ('design is everywhere,' 'everything in our lives is designed') without that perspective.

The idea of Orders of Designing (several versions discussed in Tonkinwise 2015) gives a sense of increasing power, over time, of design as a change agent. Of course this refers only to a tiny percentage of leading-edge practice, with the higher order designing having a much higher profile in design academia than outside it. This contributes to the designer-hubris problem, whereby students think they can simply add an overlay of higher-order designing onto conventional design; thus many Graphic, Product and Media design graduates think that just because they are Designers, they can operate at the higher levels, designing systems, strategies, change-campaigns, and so on. What they and many of their teachers do not recognize is that conventional discipline-based design education cannot contribute

to substantial change unless students are inducted into understanding theories of power, social structure and social change, and the like.

If one were to design a postgraduate (or even undergraduate) degree course in, say Meta-design or Transition Design, it might, on the surface, look more like Humanities than Design. It would teach on: Theories of Power, Change and the Political; Culture/Sociality; History and Philosophy of Technology; Theories of Subjectivity, Mind/Mentalities; Theories of Making and Designing and contextual studies ('history') such as Modernity /Enlightenment. But the course subjects would not have these titles; they would not be taught as conventional Humanities courses or 'complimentary studies.' The challenge would be how to make connections to design, but not in appropriative way, reducing, decontextualizing, and hollowing out the radical nature of deep ideas, old and new. The teachers would not feel the compulsion to constantly relate 'the history of ideas' to design, in fact they would expose as superficial the design professions' instrumental appropriation of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. How would they do this? Precisely by *not* making links to design-as-it-is, precisely by refusing the line 'we study psychology to better understand what motivates people because this can help us reach our target markets more effectively.' The framework for teaching from this body of knowledge would need to be meta-designing along with an implicit, at times explicit, critique of the design professions: 'these are the historical forces that have created the context in which design has emerged as a particular kind of delimited practice. This is what has designed design and is still designing design. This is what we need to understand so as to create a practice of counter-designing'; this, rather than working to extend the application of decontextualized and content-empty forms of design methods and design thinking to non-design fields. Students would need to be enabled to see and feel instrumentalized design as a severely stunted practice. Taking this further, what is needed is to reverse the appropriation of theory by design(ers). Philosophers, theorists, and would-be change agents need to be strategically appropriating design. This goes to Cameron Tonkinwise's (2014) point that a Transition Designer has to design in time, be a change agent, there for the long haul. Not a career, but a life-time commitment. The challenge is how to cultivate serious people, committed to lifetime projects, to their life as a project.

Mindset and posture

So, taking up this previous point – the need for seriousness and long-term commitment and life projects – means that TD would need a strategy for politicizing people, yet this is at odds with marketing it as an educational product.

The *Provocation* talks of the need to remake the designer mindset/posture, away from investment in design outcomes, and accepting of ambiguities and contradictions 'and even hypocrisy.' The further implication though is not pluralism and vagueness but 'being political.' Rather than hypocrisy, it is a matter of thinking and acting strategically, revealing or concealing as the context changes, this based on having a sense of what really matters, long term. This goes to an ethics appropriate to an epoch of transition, which might look to sources such as Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and Machiavelli's *Prince*.

There is a need to create new learning contexts by teaching philosophy, social and political theory in relevant, new and engaging ways to designers as well as to graduates and professionals from non-design fields, so as to create new postures – that is, new modes of

thinking and acting in professional and everyday life. The challenge here is how to provoke and inspire those whose education and professional life have inclined them toward analysis and critique to be able think and act creatively and pre-figuratively.

  Mish is Egyptian Arabic slang denoting not, negative, refusal.

References

Escobar, Arturo. 2013. *A Space for Research and Design for Transitions to the Pluriverse Project Outline (Draft)*. Chapel Hill: Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina.

Irwin, Terry. 2014. *Transition Design Provocation*. Pittsburgh, PA: School of Design Carnegie Mellon University.

Irwin, Terry. 2015. *Transition Design: : Design and Culture. A Proposal for a New Area of Design Practice, Study & Research*. Abingdon, UK.

Tonkinwise, Cameron. 2014. *Design's (Dis)Orders & Transition Design*. Pittsburgh, PA: School of Design Carnegie Mellon University.

Tonkinwise, Cameron. 2015. *The Generation That Needs to Be Monstrously Grumpy*. Hot Metal Bridge, Pittsburgh, PA: Tedx Talk, TEDx Youth @HMB.